

**THE HERALD OF GOD**  
**PREACHING AS HERALDING THE GOSPEL OF GRACE**

**A THESIS**  
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**RICHARD J. HARRINGTON**  
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## **DEDICATION**

To my King, who has sent me to herald His good news

Thank You.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The nature of preaching is that of a herald, particularly a divine herald. A herald is one commissioned and sent by another to speak his message in his behalf to a recipient. A divine herald is one commissioned and sent by a deity to speak a divine message to the people of the deity's choosing. Thus, a preacher is one who comes to understand the text of Scripture, and therefore grasps the message of God, and is then commissioned and sent to speak this message to God's people. His competence and success is dependent on his faithfulness to accomplish this duty. Postmodernism may be a new culture, but the nature of preaching has not changed. Preaching in a postmodern world means heralding forth God's message from Scripture to people in need of the revelation of the gospel.

## INTRODUCTION

### ANOTHER PREACHING BOOK?

#### *The Herald of God*

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching. For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths. As for you, always be sober-minded, endure suffering, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.  
- 2 Timothy 4:1-5

In many ways I am writing the book I would love to have read during seminary. To be honest, I wrote this book primarily for me. Preaching is hard work, and it is easy to lose hope or simply to forget what we do when we preach. So, I began to write down what I need most to keep me motivated, what I need to help me refocus when my preaching vision becomes blurred. Soon, I began to see some of the blind spots in my vision and needed to push further in my research and thinking: "What do I really mean by this?" "Can I support that by Scripture?" "Has anyone else articulated that better than this?" Eventually it evolved into the current book.

This is not a technical book on preaching. Numerous excellent books that deal with the how-to of preaching already exist. Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching* and Bryan Chappell's *Christ-Centered Preaching* are two outstanding examples. While neither is limited to the technique of preaching, both provide great resources for it and more. This book delves deeper into the theological foundations of what preaching is. *The Herald of God* intends to provide a concise read of what I have found to be essential theology towards homiletic ministry. If used in a classroom, it works better as a companion alongside a strong technical book on preaching. It touches on the "how to" of preaching, but more often assumes familiarity with it.



This is not the first book of its kind. D. Martin-Lloyd Jones *Preaching & Preachers* and John Stott's *Between Two Worlds* remain classics in understanding preaching. Other contemporary writers are hitting similar notes, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* by T. David Gordon and *He is Not Silent* by R. Albert Mohler provide two excellent examples. Why another book? I believe this volume can contribute something important to the discussion. It contends that a preacher is first and foremost a *herald*, and that the entirety of his role as preacher should be seen in this light. This is not a part of the theology of preaching, it is preaching.

The intended readers for this book are primarily pastors, seminarians, lay leaders, and serious-minded Christians. It is short. I am jealous of your time and want to make sure that I say only what needs to be said by way of greatest importance. In each chapter much more could be mentioned. Consider the bibliography for some ideas. I hope you find the book short enough to be used as a reference, something that you can go back to often if your preaching vision becomes blurred. When you feel discouraged about your preaching and its effectiveness, remember that you are a Divine herald sent forth to speak the very words of God (1 Pet 4:11).

It will not take long to discover that I come from a theologically reformed view of preaching. There has been a global resurgence in reformed theology that has been widely embraced by a younger generation. Time Magazine's article *10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now* where 'The New Calvinism' ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> (Mar 12, 2009) or Christianity Today's article on *Young, Restless, Reformed* (Sept 22, 2006) outline the seriousness of the movement (if it is right to call it that). I give thanks for the influence of this movement, and I have learned immensely from leading individuals recognized within it. However, this book would be a failure if it limits preaching to a movement, a denomination, or a generational trend. I have set out on a task much more daring than to write about the preaching-style of a particular movement. I am attempting something



considerably more bold and audacious. I attempt to come to grips with what preaching is. Not how a movement, denomination, or generation defines it. Not what it is for some, but what it is for all who preach.

Granted, great variety in preaching styles exists. I personally have learned immensely from sitting at the feet of a wide diversity of preachers. Black preaching fires me up. I learn immensely from conservative Presbyterian homileticians. Faithful charismatic preachers affect me deeply. Style should be as diverse as human beings. Yet, what unites our definition to call what each does “preaching”? All true preaching essentially heralds the Word of God. The more faithfully we do this, the more we do what is properly called *preaching*.

Perhaps you are thinking as you read this introduction, “The last thing in the world I need right now is another theology book. My schedule looks full, I am preaching twice this weekend, and I have yet to put together my sermon itinerary for the Fall. I only have enough time to read one book this month. I need something I can use!” Understand that I write not as a theologian but as a pastor who must think through these issues in the fray of ministry every day. The intention of this book is not to create a mini-systematic theology, but a well-thought out, theologically-minded perspective of preaching from a young local church pastor who finds himself wading through the difficulties of ministry in a post-modern world. I preach and I pastor. In the back of my mind as I write sits, “What does this mean for First Baptist Church of Haverhill, MA?” I do not want to waste your time as a pastor, any more than I want to be bothered by a book about basket-weaving or crocheting. Actually, I want to help you. I hope to encourage you that when you preach God’s Word faithfully, you engage in the greatest and most important work imaginable. My desire is that this book might work in your life the way God has been using its content in mine: to keep me faithful and energized to herald the Word and to remind me how stunning is the privilege to preach.

*Part I: Biblical and Theological Foundations Revisited*

## CHAPTER 1

### THE GLORY OF THE HERALD

#### *The Highest Calling in the World*

The office of the Christian ministry, rightly understood, is the most honourable, and important, that any man in the whole world can ever sustain... It is such an honourable, important and useful office, that if a man be put into it by God, and made faithful and successful through life, he may look down with disdain upon a crown, and shed a tear of pity on the brightest monarch on earth.

—Cotton Mather

#### *The Summoning of a Preacher*

How does God call a man to preach? If we learn nothing else from church history, God summons people to ministry through a variety of means. In 1505, a young Martin Luther found himself at the mercy of a lightning storm, cowered in fear, frightened into making the commitment to become a monk that set him down the long journey towards the Reformation.<sup>1</sup> Many would testify to a gentler prodding to the ministry of preaching than Martin experienced: an inner burning passion to preach, recognition of giftedness in understanding and communicating the Scriptures, and encouraging responses from a local church. All of these can be and often are ways in which God calls a man to preach.

It is probably best to define preaching before examining God's designation for the task. In other words, answering the question 'What is preaching?' before dealing with the question, 'Am I called to preach?' gives us a wise *modus operandi*. Not that becoming a preacher is merely a matter of reading a job description and deciding whether to sign up. There must be a call. God summons preachers; preachers do not summon themselves (Isa 49:1-2; Jer 1:5; Luke 10:1; Acts 13:2; 1 Cor 12:7-11; Gal 1:11-

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<sup>1</sup> To read of Luther's seminal calling see Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1995), 15-16, or Heiko Oberman, *Luther Man between God and the Devil* (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1992), 124-126. The irony of his initial commitment to the ministry is seen in his oath "Help, St. Anne, I will become a monk!", a commitment that would eventually lead him to condemn the cult of saints in the Protestant Reformation.



17; Eph 4:11-14). But if a man believes God has called him to preach, understanding what preaching actually is should only stoke the fire already lit within him. If we deeply grasp the nature of preaching with clarity and precision, and we still feel called and led to it by God, then this will make the next step much easier, the more difficult step: obedience.

What about those already preaching? For those of us who already preach, reminding ourselves what preaching actually is will be what sustains us to be faithful to the preaching of the Word. Most preachers pastor, and most pastors are overwhelmed by the pressing responsibilities of ministry. What will cause you to guard your preparation time to maintain a diligent preaching ministry? What will behoove you to set aside large blocks of your schedule to solitary study and rigorous preparation? Lesser motivations prevail. For the young preacher, it may be the fear of public embarrassment. No one wants to stand before a crowd of people and get tongue-tied and look awkward. But as years of ministry accrue, and we gain relative comfort before a congregation, the temptation arises to minimize the ardor of preaching work. The ability to 'wing-it' comes into play. For others the voice of their seminary homiletics professor resounds in their head (I can clearly hear the voices of Professors Mike Bullmore and Haddon Robinson in mine)<sup>2</sup>. But the louder call of the immediate will drown out even this voice in time.

This is not to be too hard on pastors. It is not as if most pastors are spending their weeks in wasted time. Rather, the valuable responsibilities of meetings, counseling, visitation, administration, developing leaders, facilitating small groups, and one-on-one discipleship become more and more time consuming. What keeps a preacher in the studies, struggling through the Greek or Hebrew grammar of a difficult

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<sup>2</sup> Mike Bullmore taught Homiletics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School during my Master of Divinity studies there, and Haddon Robinson teaches homiletics at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary where I studied under him for my Doctor of Ministry.

phrase, consulting 'one more commentary' on the passage, rereading and refining his manuscript once again? What pulls him deeper into the text and pushes him further into communicative clarity, so that week after week, year after year, decade after decade, he perseveres in a faithful preaching ministry? The answer is having a theological foundation for what preaching is all about. Our motivation for making preaching a priority is tied inextricably to understanding the nature of preaching.

A few decades ago a medical doctor turned preacher said to a group of seminarians:

So often when people are asked to lecture or to speak of preaching they rush immediately to consider methods and ways and means and mechanics. I believe that is quite wrong. We must start with presupposition and with the background, and with general principles; for, unless I am very greatly mistaken, the main trouble arises from the fact that people are not clear in their minds as to what preaching really is.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps D. Martin Lloyd-Jones diagnosis of an unhealthy approach to preaching proves still accurate today. Not that books on methods and mechanics should be discarded. They present us with part of the building blocks of preaching necessary for clear communication. However, if the foundation is not solid, no matter how sturdy the brickwork, a potential collapse awaits. The solidity of this structure gives us the rock on which preaching is built.

What is preaching? Preaching is, simply put, the primary means of God making himself known to His people. In preaching, God speaks to his people. John Calvin, the Genevan reformer wrote, "God has so chosen to anoint the lips and the tongues of his servants that when they speak the voice of Jesus yet resounds in his church."<sup>4</sup> The preacher must believe that what he does in the pulpit is the primary means of God revealing Himself. Not the only means, but the primary. "This is God speaking!" writes

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<sup>3</sup> D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 10.

<sup>4</sup> John Calvin, *Institutions of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), Book IV.



David Wells, "He speaks through the stammering lips of the preacher where that preacher's mind is on the text of Scripture and his heart is in the presence of God. God, as Luther put it, lives in the preacher's mouth."<sup>5</sup> The church becomes God's 'mouth-house'. If this foundation is not in place, and the preacher approaches the ministry of the pulpit haphazardly, then he may find himself building a house on sand.

### **Why Words Exist**

Words themselves are a miracle. No other creature uses words for communication. "Language is one of the defining characteristics that separates man from animals," writes Vern Poythress, "Language, like rationality, belongs to persons."<sup>6</sup> The very existence of verbal communication, both spoken and written, is part of what it means to be created in the *Imago Dei*. The ability to understand and communicate concepts through word symbols is an astonishing characteristic that we have hardly begun to understand. Mortimer J. Adler and Charles Van Doren in their well-known work *How to Read a Book* are so taken by this attribute of human beings that they call it "quite mysterious, almost magical." Concerning a young child's ability to grasp elementary reading, they comment, "How this happens no one really knows, despite the efforts of philosophers and psychologists over two and half millennia to study the phenomenon."<sup>7</sup> Even at a fairly young age, six or seven, a child's literary vocabulary numbers in the hundreds, and grows rapidly as she matures. Adler and Van Doren continue, "Indeed, this discovery of meaning in symbols [i.e. words] may be the most astounding intellectual

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<sup>5</sup> David F. Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 230.

<sup>6</sup> Vern Poythress, *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 20. He footnotes, "Animal calls and signals do mimic certain limited aspects of human language. And chimpanzees can be taught to respond to symbols with meaning. But this is still a long way from the complex grammar and meaning of human language. See, e.g., Stephen R. Anderson, *Doctor Doolittle's Delusion: Animals and the Uniqueness of Human Language* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004)." Poythress provides an interesting discussion on the nature of scientific 'laws' as a form of God 'speaking'. The fact that human beings in general, or scientists in particular, are able to articulate these laws in language is itself evidence for rationality of the Universe and the existence of God.

<sup>7</sup> Mortimer J. Alder & Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1972), 25.



feat that any human being ever performs—and most humans perform it before they are seven years old!”<sup>8</sup>

The power of words only grows as we mature in our use of them. “The tongue has the power of life and death, and those who love it will eat its fruit” (Prov 18:22). Sticks and stones may break bones, but words heal hearts, embody beauty, topple nations, and shape history. The tongue unsheathes the weapon of the word. It is an unwieldy tool. James reminds us, “All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue” (Jas 3:7-8). Tongues are capable of creating and conquering empires. Tongues put a body on the highest forms of love and flesh on the deepest forms of hatred. But the greatest potential for the power of the tongue is also its most dangerous trap, “With our tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness” (Jas 3:9). With our tongues we curse or worship God.

Words predate us. The first words spoken into our universe were by God, “And God said...,” by which He created the cosmos. According to the writer of Genesis, speech was a function of God well before it ever became a function of man. Why did God use words? Certainly not so that the Persons of the Godhead could understand one another. There were no need of lips to speak them nor ears to hear them.<sup>9</sup> It is so that God may make the knowledge of Himself and His will known to us. God did not create languages so that He could understand us. God created languages so that we could understand Him. God’s will is manifested in a way that is limited by language, and

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<sup>8</sup> Mortimer J. Alder & Charles Van Doren, *How to Read a Book*, 25.

<sup>9</sup> Did God use an existent human language? Vern Poythress discusses the mystery of the use of the verbal in creation, “But God does not indicate whether he used Hebrew or English or an angelic language or his own unique divine language when he originally spoke, “Let there be light.” In the case of Genesis 1:3, we at least have a representation in Hebrew.” *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*, 45. Perhaps what is most important is not what language God used, but that the presentation of creation to us is indeed verbal.

yet still Divine.<sup>10</sup> Words cannot exhaustively reveal God. When using words to reveal Himself, God condescends to speak to us in a 'lisp' to compensate for our limitations, as Calvin suggests:

For who even of slight intelligence does not understand that, as nurses commonly do with infants, God is wont in a measure to 'lisp' in speaking to us? Thus such forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as accommodate the knowledge of him to our slight capacity. To do this he must descend far beneath his loftiness.<sup>11</sup>

Words cannot contain God, but they can nevertheless accurately and meaningfully speak of God. Words, in a measure, bring the infinite to the finite. More than any other reason, this is why words exist.

The first words spoken to man were from God, revealing to Adam the freedom to eat freely from all trees in the garden except one. Thus the first words spoken and heard in relation to man are words that reveal the will of God to us. The reality that language allows us to communicate with one another grants to us an added blessing. Even this reveals the God-given nature of language. "Language...is a God given capacity," writes Kevin Vanhoozer, "Part of what it means to be in the image of God is to enjoy the capacity of verbal interaction. What Noam Chomsky attributes to an innate human capacity—the ability to generate intelligible sentences—is from a Christian perspective a gracious privilege and responsibility: the dignity of communicative agency."<sup>12</sup> But let us understand that God created Adam with the ability to understand and use words before 'another' existed.

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<sup>10</sup> Vern Poythress compares God's speech to the incarnation of Christ. Even as Jesus fully maintained His divinity upon His incarnation, so God's words do not cease to be divine even as they become part of our created world, "...when God speaks and says what is to be the case in this world, his words do not cease to have divine power and unchangeability that belongs to him. Rather, they remain divine, and in addition have the power to specify the situation with respect to creaturely affairs. God's word remains divine when it becomes law, a specific directive with respect to this created world." *Redeeming Science: A God-Centered Approach*, 22.

<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutions of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1 (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 121.

<sup>12</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, "Introduction: Hermeneutics, Text, and Biblical Theology" *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 40.



Before Eve, Adam spoke. Naming the creatures was not a means of keeping Adam busy and out of trouble while alone. Through it God revealed the power of words that Adam alone possessed among all the creatures. No other creature names, revealing its stewardship, authority, and responsibility over another, except God's image-bearer. Even as God named Adam, so in the presence of God, Adam named the creatures via words. Adam's first words in the hearing of another human being are words of praise to God. These words were not spoken to Eve, as in "*You* are now bone of my bone..." and "*You* will be called woman...", but spoken in the presence of God "*This* is now bone of my bone..." and "*This* shall be called woman..." (Gen 2:23).<sup>13</sup> Adam is addressing God. He will of course eventually use words to speak to his wife. For one, presumably Eve must rely on him to communicate to her the command of God concerning the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Adam in a sense is the first preacher. He is the first to bear the responsibility to use words to faithfully herald the message of God's will to another. To do this he must use words.

### ***The Words of the Preacher***

God created languages primarily so that He may be known by words. Sight and taste and touch may provide auxiliary means to reveal the glory of God, but it is hearing and speaking words that make His character and will known to us. God enables words to be spoken truthfully and authoritatively about Himself. These words, inscribed in Scripture, are the breath of God (2 Tim 3:16). It is these words that the preacher, as an image-bearer of God, strives to expose faithfully and to make God known. "True preaching begins with this confession: We preach because God has spoken," writes

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<sup>13</sup> The 'this' emphasizes Adam's excitement over seeing Eve for the first time, "In ecstasy man bursts into poetry on meeting his perfect helpmeet...by opening the tricolon and bicolon with 'this' and then by concluding with the same word the man's exclamation concentrates all eyes on this woman," Gordon Wenham, *Genesis 1-15 WBC* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 70. His versified exclamation is a demonstration of the power of words to communicate his praise to God for His creation of a "suitable helper."



Mohler, "That fundamental conviction is the fulcrum of the Christian faith and of Christian preaching."<sup>14</sup>

It is no mere trifle that Christ is called "the Word of God," the self-revelation of the Triune God. The Son's primary function in relation to humankind is to make God known, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known" (John 1:18).<sup>15</sup> Christ is the complete Image of the character and will of God, and in his life, ministry, and particularly death and resurrection, God is made known to us. The faithful preaching of the whole revelation of God in Scripture, and centrally in Christ, brings the knowledge of God into our presence. God reveals himself in the faithful preaching of the Word. When a preacher preaches, he uses words for the most basic and central purpose for which they exist: to show forth God.

Post-modernism claims that words are 'pliable' and 'slippery,' yet even as they write these words they expect those who read them to understand them correctly. Postmodern authors, just as writers in all previous generations, expect to communicate ideas through words. To destroy semantic meaning through verbal communication is like tearing down the podium from which they speak. There is a reason why human beings utilize words for the vast majority of their communication, whether through speech, books, or websites. It is because as tricky as words can be, they are still by far the most articulate option available to us.

Words have found many uses for our tongues: from conversations, to narration, to poetry, to deep expressions of worship. Sin has made great use of this tool as well: from lying, to obscenity, to cursing, to blaspheming. As James tells us, "the tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets

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<sup>14</sup> R. Albert Mohler, *He is Not Silent* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2008), 40.

<sup>15</sup> The Greek word behind 'to make known' is literally 'to explain, interpret', a word from which we get the modern term *exegeses*. Of course, we cannot read the modern English derivative into its Greek root, but it is surely remarkable that Christ in a sense 'exegetes' the Father as the preacher exegetes the Word.

the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell" (3:6). But for a hallowed hour, a glorious glimpse, the tongue can return to its most primal and profound use, namely revealing God. When a preacher preaches, he does not merely speak as one person to others. He is claiming to be a faithful conveyor of God's Word. He becomes God's spokesman. He stands as a herald in the place of his Master and Maker. When he speaks, "he should do it as one speaking the very words of God" (1 Pet 4:11).

### ***What Is Great Preaching?***

It makes sense to fine-tune a definition of great preaching from the outset in a book about preaching. There is no such thing as perfect preaching, except out of the mouth of Jesus, but throughout history we have certainly seen sparks of great preaching. As a budding athlete who wants to improve her abilities should look to the practices and disciplines of great Olympians, or as a medical student who wants to develop into an exceptional physician should pursue mentoring from great doctors, so should ministers who want to become better preachers know what great preaching is all about.

Perhaps no man rises higher from the pages of the Old Testament than Moses for the power of his words, and likewise in the New Testament than the apostle Paul. They were arguably the greatest mouthpieces of God's Word outside of Christ in Scripture. Consider - both were highly educated and literate men. Moses was "educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22). Paul's great learning was known far and wide (Acts 26:24). Yet, if this is all there is to it, there is a fatal flaw. Mechanics and rhetoric are helpful aspects of understanding good preaching, but if this is what makes preaching great, then Moses and Paul were not great preachers. Moses was about as rhetorically inclined as the bulrushes he was pulled from. Actually the



bulrushes may have outdone him in structure and aesthetic. The thought of preaching was enough to chill Moses to the bones. He argued with God, "O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" (Exod 4:10). By modern standards of rhetoric Moses might be courageous enough to handle a less than mediocre dinner toast. And yet Moses was a great preacher.

What about the apostle Paul? Surely he was a great preacher, perhaps the greatest of preachers. He almost single-handedly shook the Roman Empire by his itinerant preaching. Most preachers today would give half their library to be able to preach one sermon like Paul. Yet we read these harsh words in 2 Corinthians describing the reputation he has earned as a preacher: "His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing" (10:10).<sup>16</sup> Paul's writing style could contend with the best of men, but his public speaking skills were about as memorable as the tents he made. The erudite Athenians had a rather ungenerous summary of Paul's rhetorical abilities: "babbler"<sup>17</sup> (Acts 17:18). Yet the apostle Paul was a great preacher.

What then is great preaching? Moses and Paul, both rhetorically handicapped, and yet they remain two of the greatest preachers God has ever appointed. Moses who proclaimed God's word before the most powerful men in ancient Egypt and Paul whose preaching set the Roman Empire ablaze both lacked what we so often value most about

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<sup>16</sup> It is likely that Paul's inhibited public speaking skills were more by choice than by lack of ability. He intentionally tries to separate himself from the polished rhetoric of the professional speakers of the 1<sup>st</sup> century Greek world.

<sup>17</sup> Greek *spermalogos*, translated literally as 'seed-picker'. The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers found Paul's rhetoric to be basically a conglomeration of randomly picked theological ideas. Others are so confused with what Paul is saying they believe he is speaking about foreign gods, due to his reference to Jesus and the Resurrection (Greek *anastasis*, a feminine word which confused the Athenians into thinking he was referring to a goddess). This in no way takes away from Paul's faithful missionary efforts to the Athenians in the extraordinarily daunting task of preaching the gospel among the educated pagans of Athens, particularly in the Areopagus. His effectiveness is described later in the chapter as converts are recorded. The reference here is just to say that Paul's rhetoric was not immediately impressive to the cultured Athenians, and it is not his public speaking abilities that allow him converts.



preaching today. What did they have that made up the difference? What made them great? What they lacked in style they more than made up for in *weight*. Weight is a popular word among the writers of Scripture. The Hebrew word *cabod* usually translated 'glory' throughout the Old Testament flows from the idea of weight.<sup>18</sup> One who has glory has *substance, gravity, weightiness*.

### ***The Weight of Preaching***

"There is a certain 'glory' in the preaching ministry,"<sup>19</sup> writes John Stott. That glory is the weight of which I speak. Weight is what makes a preacher great, weightiness of words, words that convey substance. Behind the preacher should be a message that makes serious demands upon its hearers. Moses may not have been a Cicero when it came to rhetoric, but Cicero never said a line set with the glory of the words "Let my people go that they may worship me!" (Exod 8:1). Paul may not have been a Churchill when it came to public speaking, but no words of Churchill's were as weighty as his in the Areopagus, "Men of Athens...what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you" (Acts 17:22-23). Entertainment was not their concern. Eutychus learned a lesson the hard way: never sit by the window when Paul is preaching (Acts 20:7-12). But what they said was weighty enough to make the Nile run red.

Moses and Paul had something to say. How they said it was secondary. They had a message. Great preaching is not first and foremost about the skill in which we say something. Great preaching is about the weightiness of the message spoken. Perhaps in preaching the most basic principle has become the most overlooked, even though it is

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<sup>18</sup> BDB lists the verbal form of *cabod* as "be heavy, weighty, burdensome, honoured", the adjectival as simply "heavy" or "glorious," and the noun "abundance, honour, glory" BDB, *Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 457-458.

<sup>19</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 9.

the most important: Great preachers have something to say. Something so pressing and so valuable and so urgent, that it cannot help but be said. Say it through mumbling, say it through stuttering, say it with flushed red cheeks and shaky, sweaty palms, but say it they must. A fire burns in their bones to preach. If they were silent the very stones would cry out.

Moses' body may be missing somewhere on Mount Pisgah, but his message still finds a place in the hearts and souls of its hearers today. Nero may have finally snuffed out the life of Paul, but his words still singes hearts and consciences today. One may dismiss Moses as ineloquent and Paul as a babbler, but to disregard their message is to the hearer's own peril. No definitive images of what Moses and Paul looked like survive, no clues as to the pitch and tone of their voices, no authoritative descriptions of their gesticulations or mannerisms. What remains is the pressing weight of their message.

### ***"Fire! Fire!"***

"There are three types of preachers," writes Haddon Robinson, "those to whom you cannot listen; those to whom you can listen; and those to whom you must listen."<sup>20</sup> Great preachers are those we *must* listen to. The weight of the message is deeply understood by the one speaking it. The glory of the message is such that it gives the messenger conviction and authority in what he says. What strikes you as more important while sitting in an auditorium: the skilled speaker waxing eloquent on any number of subjects, or the earnest scream of the onsite janitor, 'Fire! Fire!?' A listener may sit and enjoy the sweet melodious tune of the skilled speaker for hours, but will march immediately to the trumpet call of the janitor's warning, not because he's a janitor, but because his message is weighty. Great preachers are more like the janitor yelling 'Fire!' than the trained orator.

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<sup>20</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 175.



There is urgency and earnestness in the message of great preaching. It is urgent because death is imminent. The songs of Heaven can be heard even as the smoke of Hell can be smelt. Every man, woman, and child who has ever heard a sermon has one thing in common. Every president, prime minister, or peasant who has heard the words of a preacher share this same commonality: they are all mortal. As Richard Baxter famously said, "I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men!"<sup>21</sup> Great preachers believe that life and death, heaven and hell, time and eternity hang on the words that come from their mouths. Preaching is serious business. It relays a message that influences the eternal state of a soul.

John Piper in his book on preaching mourns the loss of this power of weightiness in preaching that was so evident in men like Jonathan Edwards and Thomas Chalmers, regardless of the mechanics of their style:

I want to give as strong a conviction as words can convey that the work of preaching is to be done in 'blood-earnestness.' We are in no danger of mechanical imitation of Edwards and Chalmers and their Puritan fathers. We have fallen so far from their conception of preaching that we couldn't imitate it if we tried. I say 'fallen' because, whether a manuscript should be read or whether a sermon should be two hours long, and its sentences complex and stories few, the fact is that the *glory* of these preachers was their earnestness—an earnestness that might be called *gravity*.<sup>22</sup>

The gravity of great preachers comes from a common origin: they believe their message. With every ounce of their soul they believe it. They preach from their toes up; not just from their tongues out. If you want to cast away what they say, then you must cast them away as well. The preacher's very lifeblood flows through their sermon. To sever the two is to kill them both. Their sermons contain the blood and sweat and tears of the preacher.

The opposite of great preaching is not poor preaching. Often when we think about poor preaching, we think about someone who is nervous or someone who is

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<sup>21</sup> Richard Baxter, *Love Breathing Thanks and Praise*.

<sup>22</sup> John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 51. Emphasis mine.



monotonous. The opposite of great preaching is light preaching. It is preaching that says little. It is preaching that is fluff. It is preaching sermons that the preacher himself does not believe or does not care deeply about. Light preaching is preaching without weight and gravity. A nervous minister we can excuse, so long as he bleeds forth with 'blood-earnestness' the message onto the pulpit. Simply because someone lacks education or struggles with his speech does not necessarily make him a poor preacher. If he is faithful to the message of Scripture, and believes it deeply, even if he stutters his way through his sermon, he is preaching. But the orator who uses all his flowery words to say nothing of consequence is inexcusable. His message is innocuous and his hearers left numb. Poor preaching is the preacher as pundit. Poor preaching is the preacher as rhetorician. Poor preaching is the preacher as polished professional.

Those who hear great preaching will not walk away without feeling the seriousness of the message. It demands to be heard. They may hate it, they may love it, but they cannot ignore it. That is preaching that has weight. That is preaching that has glory. That is what great preaching is all about.

### ***The Priority of Preaching***

It is no wonder that the reformers put the first mark of a true church as the faithful preaching or teaching of the Word.<sup>23</sup> Not to say that all that is needed in a church is

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<sup>23</sup> After the preaching or teaching of the Word, the second mark is the administration of the biblical sacraments of baptism and the Lord's Supper. Some also include a third mark relating to Church discipline. John Calvin writes in the *Institutes*, "Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ's institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists," *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.1.9, 1023. Similar to this is the Augsburg Confession (1530), which described the marks of a true church as the gospel rightly taught and the Sacraments rightly administered. (see Article VII "Of the Church"). The Belgic Confession (1561) describes the marks, "The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults" (Article XXIX). Later, the Westminster Confession (1647) would follow this priority of the Word, "And particular Churches, which are members thereof, are more or less pure, according as the doctrine of the Gospel is taught and embraced, ordinances administered, and public worship performed more or less purely in them" (Article XXV).

faithful preaching. It is a question of priority. Numerous other forms of ministry should and do exist in a true church, but must never drown out the voice of the sermon.

In the book of Acts, we read of this danger, caught and avoided, in the early church (6:1-7). The apostles are serving the church in Jerusalem with a vibrant ministry. The doors are bursting with new converts. People are growing and flourishing. However, a relatively minor dispute breaks out among the church. The Hebraic Jews are overlooking the Grecian Jews in the distribution of food.

The apostles could have seen this as a great mentoring opportunity on the unity of the gospel. They could have used it to explain the need to break down social and cultural barriers. They could have got down and dirty and figured out the nitty-gritty specifics of this issue and applied appropriate discipline where necessary. All of which would have been apostolic and pastoral. But instead they realize a larger problem surfacing. Issues such as this are consuming time normally devoted to the ministry of the Word and prayer. This reveals a slippery slope that could result in the whole early church losing ground. They act wisely and appoint a group of men to devote undivided time to issues such as this and others related directly to the practical needs of the church, freeing the apostles to focus on the ministry of the Word and prayer. Ironically, two out of this newly appointed group of men, Stephen and Philip, end up being two of the more effective ministers of the Word in all of Acts! The message is clear: Keep the ministry of the Word at the forefront.

The pedestal which preaching demands must be erected or preaching will lose its effectiveness. God reveals himself to His people through His Word, and the primary way that His Word is given to His people comes through the verbal proclamation to the corporate church embodied in the ministry of preaching. As Francis Schaeffer reminded



a previous generation, "He is there and He is not silent."<sup>24</sup> Until preachers regain a theological framework for understanding what preaching is, the heralding forth of the gospel will continue to be shelved for other well-intentioned priorities. In ministry, preaching is preeminent.

### ***The Highest Vocation***

Let me say this with a straight face and with complete sobriety: *Preaching is the highest calling in the world.* Not just the highest calling in the church, the highest calling in the world. It is higher even than academic excellence, military duties, and political positions. Higher than presidents, potentates, and prime ministers. As Spurgeon reminded:

Yours is not a trade, or a profession. Assuredly if you measure it by the tradesman's measure it is the poorest business on the face of the earth. Consider it as a profession: who would not prefer any other, so far as golden gains or worldly honours are concerned? But if it be a divine calling, and you a miracle-worker, dwelling in the supernatural, and working not for time but for eternity, then you belong to a nobler guild, and to a higher fraternity than any that spring of earth and deal with time.<sup>25</sup>

This is not merely a perky pep talk that preachers tell themselves to get them started in the morning. It remains gospel truth. Preaching is the highest calling in the world. John Wycliffe correctly declared, "The highest service that men may attain to on earth is to preach the Word of God."<sup>26</sup> All other duties and responsibilities in ministry must bow before its importance, for when we preach it is as if God himself were speaking. If God calls you to preach, you will engage in the most ancient task of human existence, and one of the highest forms of human activity. It is using words for the primary purpose for which they exist: to show forth God.

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<sup>24</sup> Francis Schaeffer, *He Is There And He Is Not Silent* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1972).

<sup>25</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 319.

<sup>26</sup> Cited in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1923), 22.



Without faithful preaching, the church will die. The church, be it in a full-blown post-modern world, can never move beyond preaching. In the pre-modern, modern, or post-modern world, the foundation of preaching remains the same. Preaching remains the spinal cord of the church's ministry. Where it pulsates healthy and intact, you will often find a church where the ministries that flow from it are nourished and replenished. "Show me a church where the preaching is good, and yet the church is still moribund. I've never seen such a church," writes T. David Gordon, "The moribund churches I've seen have been malpreached to death."<sup>27</sup> Good preaching stands at the soul of every true revival. It is irreplaceable. Why? Because preaching is heralding God's Word to God's people. It brings an unchanging gospel to bear on a changing culture. It proclaims the Word of the Lord. It uses words as they were primarily created to be used. It is the breath of God expounded. Until the church regains this framework, and preachers are driven with a theological conviction of its necessity, we will never again preach with glory.

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<sup>27</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (Phillisburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 33.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE WORK OF THE HERALD

#### EXPOSITORY PREACHING

He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God! I have it: here is knowledge enough for me. Let me be *homo unius libri* [a man of one Book]. Here then I am, far from the busy ways of men. I sit down alone: only God is here. In his presence I open, I read his book; for this end, to find the way to heaven.

- Richard Baxter

#### **God's Herald**

"Hark! The herald angels sing. Glory to the newborn King!" wrote Charles Wesley. God uses more than Angels as heralds. Preaching means at its essence heralding. At its heart, it is speaking forth a message given to us by another. The concept of preaching as heralding becomes evident from the corpus of Greek words used for "preaching" in the New Testament. The writers of Scripture employ more than one verb for the proclamation of the Scriptures, the most common are *euangelizomai*, *didasko*, and *kerusso*.<sup>28</sup> The mouthful, *euangelizomai*, literally means to announce good news,<sup>29</sup> and focuses primarily on the spread of the gospel to the nations, with *didasko* emphasizing the teaching aspect: to provide instruction in a formal or informal setting—to teach, teaching.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> In terms of sheer numerical occurrence, in the New Testament the verbal forms *euangelizomai* occurs 54 times, *didasko* 97, and *kerusso* 61, respectively, though not always in regards to preaching. The Usage of *didasko* in particular has a broad range of biblical usage.

<sup>29</sup> Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. 4<sup>th</sup> edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1979), 317. Similarly, Louw & Nida, "to communicate good news concerning something (in the NT a particular reference to the gospel message about Jesus)—'to tell the good news, to announce the gospel.'" Louw, Johannes P., Nida, Eugene Albert, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*. 2nd edition (New York : United Bible societies, 1996), 1:411.

<sup>30</sup> Louw, Johannes P. , Nida, Eugene Albert, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains*, S. 1:412. Or simply, "teach" Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 192.



The closest equivalent to the English verb "preaching" is *kerusso*. Its meaning is clear: to announce, make known by a herald.<sup>31</sup> It is important to understand that the words used for preaching were not invented by the church in order to describe what the apostles were doing. They used a common Greek word, such as *kerusso*, which they believed described most closely the nature of what they were doing. Even to translate *kerusso* "to preach" can be misleading. As the German lexicographer Kittel explains, "κηρύσσειν does not mean the delivery of a learned and edifying or hortatory discourse in well-chosen words and a pleasant voice. It is the declaration of an event. Its true sense is 'to proclaim'."<sup>32</sup> *Kerusso* is "the herald's cry."<sup>33</sup>

Heralds have a long history in ancient civilization. The Septuagint has Pharaoh using them to announce Joseph's rise to power in Egypt (Gen 41:43) and the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar used them to proclaim his decrees (Dan 3:4). In ancient Greece the prince employed numerous royal heralds, freemen who worked closely by his side. Later they came to be employed by the state to announce official proclamations to the people such as public festivals or the victors of athletic games. They were seen not as formal rhetoricians, but as those commissioned with the task of speaking on behalf of the one sending them. Their value was in their faithfulness to the message given to them.<sup>34</sup>

Generally speaking, heralds were not viewed as particularly venerable. The status or importance of the position was based not on the nature of heralds themselves

<sup>31</sup> Bauer, Walter, William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 431. Similarly, "to publicly announce religious truths and principles while urging acceptance and compliance—"to preach." Louw, Johannes P., Nida, Eugene Albert, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains*, 1:416.

<sup>32</sup> Kittel, Gerhard (Hrsg.), Bromiley, Geoffrey William (Hrsg.), Friedrich, Gerhard (Hrsg.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 3:703.

<sup>33</sup> The noun form of *kerusso* is *kerux*, a herald. In the New Testament, the apostle Paul refers to himself as a *kerux* in 2 Tim 1:11 and 2 Tim 2:7 (see also 1 Cl 5, 6). Noah is referred to as a *kerux* in 2 Pet 2:5.

<sup>34</sup> As Kittel, "It is demanded, then, that they deliver their message as it is given to them. The essential point about the report which they give is that it does not originate with them. Behind it stands a higher power. The herald does not express his own views. He is the spokesman for his master." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. 3:687-688 (see 39 Aesch. Suppl., 931; Plat. Leg., XII, 941a. Aeschin. Or., 3, 189).

but on the significance of the message and the status of the one who sends them, "It matters a great deal which authority the herald serves. His status depends on that of the one who commissions him, and on the nature of the commission."<sup>35</sup> When a master sent heralds into foreign territory they were to be received hospitably. If the message provoked the recipient to anger, the herald was to be protected from harm as merely the bearer of the news. He does not represent himself, but his master.<sup>36</sup> Branches of pagan religions recognized heralds of divine messages, sent by the gods to speak to men in their behalf. The Stoics and Cynics, for example, believed that the gods commissioned individuals to speak authoritative revelation in their stead.<sup>37</sup>

Preaching means heralding. The preacher is first and foremost a herald of God. If you have been given the responsibility to preach you are a herald. You have an urgent message to proclaim. You have been entrusted with a vocation. Your calling is to herald, to proclaim, to speak forth God's good news. Stott writes, "So in the market square or some other public place, without fear nor favour, he lifts up his voice and makes it known. 'We herald Christ crucified' and 'we herald... Jesus Christ as Lord'."<sup>38</sup> Preaching is heralding forth the message of God from the Scriptures. "Preaching is not conversation," claims Piper, "Preaching is not discussion. Preaching is not casual talk about religious things. Preaching is not simply teaching. Preaching is the heralding of a message permeated by the sense of God's greatness and majesty and holiness."<sup>39</sup>

There exists one particular virtue that defines all good heralds: faithfulness (see Prov 6:19, 12:17, 13:17, 14:5, 14:25, 19:5, 19:9, 25:13). A preacher first and foremost is

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<sup>35</sup> Kittel, Gerhard (Hrsg.) ; Bromiley, Geoffrey William (Hrsg.) ; Friedrich, Gerhard (Hrsg.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, S. 3:686.

<sup>36</sup> As a demonstration of the seriousness of this protection is the account of the Spartans notoriously killing two heralds sent to them from the Persians, and after realizing the severity of their action, later send two Spartans to their Persian adversaries as replacements.

<sup>37</sup> See Kittel, Gerhard (Hrsg.) ; Bromiley, Geoffrey William (Hrsg.) ; Friedrich, Gerhard (Hrsg.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3:693.

<sup>38</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 135.

<sup>39</sup> John Piper, "Preaching as Expository Exultation for the Glory of God" *Preaching the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 104-105.



one called to be faithful to the message he proclaims. Without faithfulness, a herald ceases to be competent, useful, or valuable. A master hires a herald based primarily on this qualification. Faithfulness connotes more than what a herald does with his message. It must embody his whole life. It is what he is; he doesn't just act faithfully, he is faithful to his master.

Heralds do not make up the news. Heralds who make up the news get fired, without pay. That is simply not the job of a herald. The message is one that has already been passed on to us. We do not bear responsibility to manipulate, change, or recreate the message. It is the herald's role to speak another's message in public proclamation. Sidney Greidanus writes, "In New Testament times heralds proclaimed publicly the message that was given to them by their master. It is important to note that the message did not originate with the heralds but with their master."<sup>40</sup> Faithful heralds were carefully sought after, and were a valuable blessing to the masters who sent them. The wise master was careful to recognize their value, "Like the cold of snow in the time of harvest is a faithful messenger to those who send him; he refreshes the soul of his masters" (Prov 25:13). When we preach, we preach as heralds entrusted by God with His message.

### ***"Thus Saith the Lord!"***

It is not merely in the pagan world that we find divine heralds. An image of a herald exists that brings out the nature of preaching that deserves special attention. It is found all throughout the pages of the Old Testament. The call to preach is also a call to prophesy. Like the fiery, oftentimes eccentric conduits of God's Word found throughout the pages of the Old Testament, the preacher is called to prophetic proclamation. This connection is theological rather than semantic. "Prophecy" appears in the New

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<sup>40</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 4.

Testament in a variety of ways. Much attention is rightfully given to its use as a spiritual gift that I believe is contextually distinct from the preaching of the Word. New Testament prophecy seems to be active in the early church for a variety of reasons, and questions over the cessation or continuation of the gift of prophecy for today, however important, are tangential to our discussion. The theological connection between Old Testament prophecy and Christian preaching however is inescapable.

The most obvious connection between the two is that of *speaking*. Prophecy in substance is a ministry of proclamation through speech. The prophet, more than any other type of herald, is burdened with the responsibility to speak forth a message. Although the prophets are called upon to symbolize their message through various prophetic acts (prophets at times will be seen walking around naked, marrying a prostitute, and cooking over feces!) this is only meant to complement their verbal message. Ultimately a prophet is called to speak forth God's message audibly.

There are numerous other vocations in the Old Testament, all of which require various actions associated with them. The office of king of Israel, so often incompetently filled, calls for speaking.<sup>41</sup> Yet speaking is not his exclusive or primary role. Alongside the king there are generals, advisors, and stewards. In the temple there are priests, singers, and artisans. Throughout Israel there are those called as scribes, shepherds, and sages; farmers, masons, and fishermen. Yet only one unique vocation in the Old Testament can be found with a role virtually exclusively requiring speaking forth a message: the role of prophet.

The idea that God would use the imperfect and impure mouths of human beings to speak His will presents a shocking reality. Indeed, the nature of this verbal responsibility causes a great deal of angst and guilt among those called. The prophet

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<sup>41</sup> Consider for example Proverbs 16:10, "The lips of a king speak as an oracle, and his mouth should not betray justice." Some kings fulfill multiple roles, as David and Solomon not only ruled Israel as king, but also spoke prophetically to the people, as seen specifically in the Psalms.



Isaiah recognizes his own guilt and incompetence before an All-Holy God due directly to his impure speech, "Woe is me, I am ruined, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips..." (Isa 6:5). It is only when his lips are seared with the live coal from the altar of God that he is deemed atoned to speak. In his commission, he is called to a vocation of speech: "Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I. Send me!' He said, 'Go and *tell* this people..." (Isa 6:8-9, emphasis mine). Similarly Jeremiah is diffident concerning his own speaking abilities, "Ah, Sovereign Lord," I said, 'I do not know how to *speak*; I am only a child.'" Nevertheless God calls him to verbal proclamation: "But the Lord said to me, "'Do not say, 'I am only a child.' You must go to everyone I send you to and *say* whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you and will rescue you,' declares the Lord'" (Jer 1:6-8, emphases mine). The prophet is a person called to speak a message from God.

The responsibility of the prophet was to proclaim what God tells him to proclaim. He becomes the mouthpiece or the instrument of God. Only in this way can he speak with the authority of God, speaking from the first person singular, as if God himself were present. For example, Ezekiel prophesies, "This is what the Sovereign LORD says to the mountains and hills, to the ravines and valleys: 'I am about to bring a sword against you, and I will destroy your high places'," (Ezek 6:3).

As the prophet's primary vocation was one of verbal proclamation, so is the calling of the Christian preacher. Of course, not merely the use of one's mouth connects the Old Testament prophet to the Christian preacher, as if merely speaking is equivalent to prophesy. *It is the content of the speech.* In the Old Testament the prophet had a very clear goal in presenting his message, the deviation from which was fatal. The prophet was called upon to speak the "Word of YHWH." If he were to speak his own thoughts instead, or worse yet, simply what the people want to hear, it would be

equivalent to forfeiting his own life. We read in the Torah, "But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death" (Deut 18:20). Imagine having that stipulation written into a pastoral job description, "Preach the Word or die!"

### ***"It is Written!"***

The content of the prophet and the preacher's speech is the same, though the medium through which he receives the "Word of YHWH" has changed. Unlike the prophet who receives the Word in numerous *im*-mediate ways, e.g. direct discourse, ecstatic experiences, or through dreams and visions, the preacher receives the Word through the Scriptures. As the Apocalypse tells us, "...the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev 19:10). Though the medium has changed, the authority remains the same. "Preachers today do not receive their messages directly from God the way the prophets did," writes Greidanus, "And yet, provided their sermons are biblical preachers today may also claim to bring the word of God."<sup>42</sup> This is the reason why the preacher is called to such care in handling the Scriptures, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15). The "word of truth" certainly refers to the written Word, the Old Testament Scriptures in Timothy's case. This care in study results not merely in personal edification, but also in authoritative proclamation for the preacher. The authority of the preached Word is such that Paul would later command Timothy, "In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word" (2 Tim 4:1-2).

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<sup>42</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text*, 7.



Jesus himself began His public ministry with a prophetic tie to His preaching. He begins by participating in synagogue worship, reading these prophetic words of Isaiah,

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

He exegetes the text by applying it to His own ministry of preaching, "Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him, and he began by saying to them, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your *hearing*'" (Luke 4:18-21, emphasis mine).

The Apostle Paul in his defense of the effectiveness and necessity of preaching in the heart of his letter to the Romans connects the role of a preacher intimately with the role of the prophet, quoting twice from Isaiah:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!" But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, "Lord, who has believed our message?" Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Rom 10:14-17)

Israel heard the good news of God's salvation over the onslaught of Babylonian might. Yet this was just a foreshadowing of hearing the good news of God's salvation over the onslaught of God's righteous wrath. Paul grieves that even as Israel as a people rejected the message of the prophets, so have they rejected the message of the preachers.

In 2 Peter, Old Testament false prophets are tied explicitly with New Testament false teachers, and one can assume conversely faithful teachers with faithful prophets: "Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. But there were also

false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you" (2 Pet 1:20-2:1). The presence of false teachers mishandling the Scriptures and the message of Christ should cause no surprise considering that there were false prophets who spoke wrongly concerning God's Word centuries prior. A faithful preacher, like a faithful prophet, is one who rightly teaches the Scriptures.

### ***Expository Preaching: Redundant Redundancy***

Labels are funny things. The problem with smacking a label on something is often it categorizes it as one among many similar types. I love ice cream. What kind of ice cream? *Chocolate chip cookie dough* ice cream. Or to be even more specific, *Edy's chocolate chip cookie dough* ice cream. This reveals my preference, my choice. There exist of course other valid choices, such as *M&M* ice cream or *Cookies 'n Cream* ice cream. There can be found also *cherry, banana, coffee and caramel*, and there can be found the traditionalists who relish *vanilla, chocolate, and strawberry*. Then there are the brands, *Edy's, Friendly's, Ben & Jerry's, Hood*, etc. (We'll leave out the sub-ice cream categories such as *no fat, low-fat*, and *sugar-free* as they don't qualify as real ice cream).

By labeling what I like, namely *Edy's chocolate chip cookie dough* ice cream, I have validated other choices as similar ice cream preferences. Such is the problem with slapping the label *expository* before preaching. It makes the exposition of the text in preaching seem like a preference in preaching style, one category among many other valid categories: "I like expository preaching, but my associate pastor is a topical preaching guy. The youth pastor is down with dialogical preaching. The visiting preacher last week chose evangelistic preaching, our elders prefer doctrinal preaching, and Deacon Tim's wife enjoys visionary preaching. What is your favorite flavor of preaching?" Expository preaching is relegated to a single choice among an array of



preaching options. The declaration is basically that all independent preaching styles are created equal.

Half the problem hides in the semantics. What does “expository” mean? Let me attempt to provide a simple definition of expository preaching. *Expository preaching is preaching in which the point of the Scripture preached on, dictates the point of the sermon preached.*<sup>43</sup> In other words expository preaching means preaching that expounds the text. This proves true whether an expository sermon is preached verse-by-verse, or takes broad strokes. It proves true of a message that takes a topic and uses various passages (bringing out the point of the text in each), or whether one camps out on a single passage.<sup>44</sup> It proves true whether one preaches inductively or deductively. The preacher can preach on a single verse: “You shall not commit adultery” (Exod 20:14), a pericope or chapter: *1 Corinthians 13*, an entire book: *Genesis*, or even an overview of a Testament: *The Old Testament*, and still be expository, so long as the point of the sermon is the point of the Scripture he preaches on.

Granted rightly dividing a sizable pericope that encapsulates a single idea often provides the most effective way to communicate the Scriptures, still with enough care a preacher can be faithful as an expositor with virtually any size passage. Going through a book of the Bible section by section remains an invaluable approach as it clarifies the context and keeps the preacher honest about the “whole counsel of God,” but the definition of expository preaching need not be limited to this style. If the work of the

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. Mark Dever, “Expositional preaching is that preaching which takes for the point of a sermon the point of a particular passage of Scripture” *Nine Marks of Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 26. Bryan Chapell is similar, “The meaning of the passage is the meaning of the sermon” *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 23. Haddon Robinson offers more detail, “Expository preaching is the communication of a biblical concept, derived from and transmitted through a historical, grammatical, and literary study of a passage in its context, which the Holy Spirit first applies to the personality and experience of the preacher, then through the preacher, applies to the hearers” *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 21.

<sup>44</sup> Preaching an expository sermon on a topic is sometimes referred to as ‘topical expository’ or ‘text-topical’ for clarity sake, but for our purposes it we will lump faithfully expounded multi-passages sermons as a subset under Expository Preaching.

preacher has been to faithfully expose the text by finding the point of the passage and preaching on it, he has preached.

So what is the problem with using "expository" as a label for preaching? It is redundant. It is like saying "*expository* exposition" or "*preaching-style* preaching." Preaching means the heralding forth of a specific message, and that message is God's message revealed in His written Word. It is the prophetic exposition of the Word of YHWH. Preaching by its very nature is expository. It is not a flavor of ice cream, it is the very ingredients that make ice cream ice cream. There is no other form of preaching.

Please do not misunderstand, I am not saying that a preacher cannot cover a topical subject, but in preaching on that subject he must faithfully expose the written Word on that topic even if he uses numerous passages to do so. If a preacher preaches on marriage as a topic, for example, he is to exposit the numerous passages that he utilizes to explain that topic (e.g. Gen 2:18-25, Song of Songs, Eph 5:22-33). That is simply what preaching is. One can be expository and be topical or dialogical; didactic or evangelistic; visionary or exhortative, as long as the point of the sermon is dictated by the point of the passage preached.

To merely voice one's own thoughts, present a collage of stories, or to rip verses out of context to proof-text a message and not explain the point of the passage is not a different style of preaching, it is no preaching at all, except maybe dishonest preaching. One may give a fine speech while standing at a pulpit at 11:00 am on Sunday morning, but if it is merely a speaker's own thoughts or self help theory from the latest guru, it is not preaching. It may be engaging, it may even be helpful, but it is not preaching. Let us not confuse the very nature of preaching with a preference of style. Preaching means exposition.



### ***What's the Big Idea?***

Good heralding demands good exposition. Good exposition carefully follows God's thoughts after Him. It is to study the Scriptures with an eye for Authorial intent. It attempts to bring to bear on a congregation the original author's central thrust of a passage. The contrast with post-modern perspectivalism is sharp, but there is no hope of dulling it. To try to follow the rabbit down the hole of deconstruction is to find oneself lost in the labyrinth of wonderland. Texts simply do have objective meaning, as authors truly attempt to say something through them. While their meaning is not always clearly visible, oftentimes cloaked in historical and grammatical difficulties, to deny the Scripture's authors their meaning is neither safe nor right. The preacher simply must take his place and declare, "Here I Stand, I can do no other. So help me God." The hope is that through unrelenting faithful exposition people will see that the meaning of the Scriptures is simply not up for grabs to the reader. It lives actually there in the text, and can be seen by all, stubborn as a German monk and as visible as the Wittenberg door. In the course of time, expository preaching is the magisterial reformer of deconstructed texts.

Regretfully, expository preaching has become almost synonymous with academic preaching, or worse yet, boring preaching. This is at least partly due to adherents of expository preaching finding it necessary to explain the text by covering every detail of the passage, regardless of how irrelevant it is to the central idea of the text. This is not necessary or even helpful for sound exposition. As Haddon Robinson says, "Normal people do not lose sleep over the Jebusites, the Canaanites, or the Perizzites."<sup>45</sup> Grammatical and historical anomalies may appear interesting to the select few, and yet entirely beside the point when it comes to meaningful exposition. A preacher does not prepare his hearers for Bible Trivia, but for Monday morning. There

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<sup>45</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 28.

may be a time and place to race down all the rabbit trails of the text looking for small game, but the work of a good expositor is much narrower. He keeps to the main road hunting for the meaty big idea.

Exposition simply brings out the dominant idea of the passage. If the preacher can accurately and succinctly answer the questions: What is this passage about? What is the author trying to communicate? What is the "central idea, proposition, theme, thesis statement, main thought"<sup>46</sup> of this passage? Why does this passage exist? His answer will put him well on his way to expositing the passage. The preacher's job is to come to grips with this idea and to bring it to bear on his hearers through proclamation. If the preacher has been diligent in discovering it, and capable in communicating it, he has preached well. If the sermon bores someone, so be it. It will be the Scripture rather than the preacher which he or she finds uninteresting. The reaction will often be quite the opposite, as Robinson testifies:

Ministers can proclaim anything in a stained-glass voice at 11:30 on Sunday morning following the singing of hymns. Yet when they fail to preach the Scriptures, they abandon their authority. No longer do they confront their hearers with a word from God. That is why most modern preaching evokes little more than a wide yawn. *God is not in it.*<sup>47</sup>

Clarity and conciseness in communication is the expositor's goal, not verbosity and verbiage. The goal of exposition of the Word is not the dissection of a text, but directness concerning its intention.

The weight of the central idea of the passage should be worded in a way that warrants response. The preacher speaks not merely a talking commentary, who rattles off various facts to his hearers. The preacher has a responsibility to communicate those ideas powerfully and applicably through his preaching, as Chapell, "So much of the criticism expository preaching receives results from the assumption of some preachers

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<sup>46</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 36.

<sup>47</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching*, 20. Emphasis mine.



that a sermon's primary goal is to expose listeners to information about the Bible."<sup>48</sup> The Bible is not an encyclopedia, and should never be preached as such. This means the preacher's passion, emotions, and real-life applications become essential aspects in faithful heralding. In order to faithfully herald, the preacher must know intimately the passage he preaches. This is not easy work.

### ***Exegesis, Exegesis, Exegesis***

"So listen to my piece of advice: exegesis, exegesis, and yet more exegesis! Keep to the Word, to the scripture that has been given to us,"<sup>49</sup> controversial theologian Karl Barth spoke wisely to his students before being expelled from Germany in 1935. Exposition is labor. It requires the exegetical work of a serious scholar. It is the hard work of preaching. It is where the herald earns his wages. The preacher must know what God says before he ever dare stand in a pulpit to proclaim it. To do that he should do whatever it takes to understand his passage. Let the preacher do his work while it is time to labor, that he might sit back and enjoy it when the work is done. If I might turn an agricultural proverb into a homiletical one, "He who gathers crops in summer is a wise son, but he who sleeps during harvest is a disgraceful son" (Prov 10:5). There is work to be done in the field of the study before we enjoy the fruit of the harvest in the pulpit.

Consulting resources becomes a must. Granted many preachers do not have access to the commentaries, Bible dictionaries, and concordances that others take for granted. No doubt God gives his grace to those in need to make due with the limited resources they have. Rather than a detriment to consulting the best resources available to those who can, this should provide an additional motive. Many under-resourced

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<sup>48</sup> Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 78.

<sup>49</sup> Taken from Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976.) as quoted by Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 6.

preachers would literally track miles if they had the opportunity in order to have access to what many have at their fingertips with a mouse click. The media revolution has arrived, and should be used to our advantage. A faithful expositor will use the best of what he has available to come to understand the idea of the passage. If the preacher limps in his role as an expositor, he cripples his calling as a herald.

No religious standard exists for how many hours a preacher should spend preparing a sermon. Perhaps the safest guide is to spend as many hours as you need to feel sufficiently prepared to preach the passage. Most find it helpful to go through stages of preparation, beginning by working extensively with the naked text (ideally in the original languages), and only when satisfied with a clear grasp of the text moving on to consult secondary sources such as commentaries. After this, many will find it necessary to write or type out their manuscript in its entirety, or at least an extensive outline. While it is not usually wise to take a full manuscript into the pulpit, having written it out allows for clarity of thought, organization of ideas, and structure in communication. Some will find it necessary to go through their sermon orally numerous times on their own, familiarizing themselves with the audible feel of the sermon. We must be careful that this never becomes an exercise in theatrics, but there is certainly value in knowing how your sermon sounds out loud as opposed to on paper.

Prepackaged messages, bought and sold like a common commodity, may be acceptable to the comedian or politician, but are not only greatly dishonest to the work of the herald, they lack freshness, genuineness and local relevance.<sup>50</sup> If someone thinks this type of preparation simply too much work for a single sermon, perhaps he should

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<sup>50</sup> David Wells mocks this trend of using prepackaged sermons, a trend that would be humorous if it were not so tragic, "Pastors who run out of funny, inspiring, clever, and entertaining material increasingly are turning to the Internet to buy it all prepackaged. Would one not think that this material would lose its genuineness in transition? And its freshness? Never mind. If it works, if the audience is pleased, the goal has been reached. After all, don't all entertainers have ghostwriters working behind the scenes to produce their jokes? Why shouldn't pastors?" *The Courage to Be Protestant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 40-41.



rethink the task in which he engages. The preacher stands in behalf of his Master, God, heralding His message with prophetic authority. If it can be said even in daily speech that only "A fool finds no pleasure in understanding, but delights in airing his own opinions" (Prov 18:2) how much more so is it applicable to the preacher. Though sensitivity should be offered to those called to preach multiple times per week, it is hard to put a limit on what should be considered too much work for a task so daunting.

People often question how long a sermon should be: "How long is too long?" I think the best answer to this question is one I heard in seminary, "If it is good enough, no one cares." Various cultural expectations play into how long a sermon should be, however if a preacher is faithful to his text, clear in his presentation, forceful in his applications, and earnest in his exhortations, few who will speak critically of the length. As T. David Gordon writes, "I realized then that sermon length is not measured in minutes; it is measured in minutes-beyond-interest, in the amount of time the minister continues to preach after he has lost the interest of his hearers (assuming he ever kindled it in the first place)."<sup>51</sup> The preacher should take as long as it takes to say what needs to be said, no longer and certainly no shorter.

### ***A Blue Collar Worker***

Preaching is blue-collar work. By this I do not mean that it is unskilled work, or unimportant work. I grew up in a blue-collar home. My father has been an airline mechanic for over 30 years, first for the United States Air Force then for commercial airlines, working nights for the majority of his career. He must keep his mind engaged, his hands diligent, and his attitude focused. Every day he does his job so that people can fly safely from one destination to the next. How dangerous would it be if he were to go renegade? What would happen if he disregarded the manual, refused to listen to the

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<sup>51</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (Phillisburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 31.

pilots, and spurned the advice of the supervisors, and instead began to simply carry on his work in any way he feels fit? Not only would his job be in danger, but so would the well-being of those entrusting themselves to his airline. The preacher has a job to do. His job is to herald. His competency is not based on how creative or how eloquent he is, but rather on how capable he is to communicate the message he heralds. He is not a CEO. He is not an engineer. He is not a marketer. He is a blue-collar worker with a job to do. If he fails to do it, people suffer for it.

If we preach, we are heralds. We are not the one who made up the news. In some ways it is not really our sermon. It is God's message. Our job in the end is not ultimately to convince people that it is true. "We have a fixed faith to preach, my brethren," says Spurgeon, "and we are sent forth with a definite message from God. We are not left to fabricate the message as we go along."<sup>52</sup> Our job is to announce it, proclaim it, declare it to people. When a preacher steps into a pulpit his primary goal and concern is to faithfully herald the message of the text entrusted to him.

What would you think of the postal worker who opens letters and adds a little whiteout here and there and scribbles in his own notes? You would say, 'That isn't your job!' or 'Leave my mail alone!' The same is true of the preacher. Our job is not to change or re-create the message. As Mark Dever explains:

Why does the postal service exist? What do we pay mailmen to do? Do we pay them to write letters to us and put them in our mailboxes? No. We pay them to deliver faithfully the message of someone else. The mailman has been entrusted with other people's messages to us. The same is true with ministers and their ministries. We are not to invent the message but to faithfully deliver God's message to his people. That is our calling, which means that we are called as ministers only insofar as we present God's message to his people.<sup>53</sup>

Our job is to speak, to tell, the same good news that is being spoken by other faithful preachers throughout the world. Our responsibility is to be clear and concise and

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<sup>52</sup> Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 220.

<sup>53</sup> Mark Dever, "A Real Minister: 1 Corinthians 4", *Preaching the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 19.



intelligible. We have a message. Preaching is heralding forth that message. And that message is good news.

### ***A Bearer of Good News***

Our message is not bad news; it is good news! Who does not want to share good news with people? Who does not want to proclaim to people good news? It is bad news we do not want to tell people. Think of a physician. What doctor wants to tell his patient, "Your cancer is back and it's not treatable," or "Unfortunately there were some serious complications with your surgery"? Doctors love to tell people the good news, "Good news, sir, your tumor is benign!" Or "Guess what, you're going home today!" Or "Congratulations, Mr. and Mrs. Boomer, you're having a baby!" The same is true of journalism. What sports writer would not want to write the headline "The Red Sox won the world series again!"? (Unless of course you are from New York, then that is bad news). The message is good news. In fact it is the best news you could ever tell.

Certainly there is bad news that must precede the good news. More must be said of this later. Our sinfulness, spewing forth from a sinful nature, has made us objects of the righteous wrath of God. This leveling depravity should, and must, be proclaimed as the necessary dark background of the bright brilliance of the gospel. We must preach the doctrine of sin as we find it in Scripture. We must preach it even as we recognize sin's grasp in our congregation and in our own hearts. The doctrine of sin like a flood, pervasively covers the face of the earth and suffocates all victims in its icy waters, but the eyesight of the preacher should be set on the ark rising above its surface. That is where the good news is found. As Bryan Chapell writes, "The Bible's ultimate aim is beautifully positive. Scripture addresses features of our incompleteness

only because such a focus concurrently signals the work of God that makes us whole."<sup>54</sup>  
The message of the preacher is essentially good news.

### ***The Authority of the Preacher***

It is when preachers realize the prophetic calling that preaching entails that the weight of authoritative proclamation will weigh upon us. There is an increasing skepticism about authority in preaching. Kevin DeYoung describes this shift:

Discussion, yes. Dialogue, yes. Group discernment, yes. Heraldry? Proclamation? Not on this side of modernism. But is it really modernism we are rejecting or something weightier? The decline in preaching goes hand in hand with a lost confidence in the importance of truth claims. Preaching presupposes there is a message that must be proclaimed and believed. The very act of verbal proclamation by one man to God's people assumes that there is a word from God that can be ascertained, understood, and meaningfully communicated.<sup>55</sup>

Preaching by its very nature is authoritative. It proclaims something to be not only universally true, but personally incumbent upon each hearer. It is not dialogue or discussion, it is prophecy. To give this up is to change preaching into something it never has been, nor ever could be: Preaching heralds a message weightier than our own.

However, this skepticism towards authority is not unfounded. No one has this authority of his own making. This in turn should remind us that we who are called to handle the word of truth are *no more than* heralds. Preaching must be a faithful witness to the written Word. "A truthful witness saves lives, but a false witness is deceitful" (Prov 14:25). The evidence for this witness should be clearly in the text of Scripture, in plain sight for all to see. There is no secret authority that grants preachers special knowledge.<sup>56</sup> Actually it is the exact opposite, rather than hidden knowledge, the message of preachers is as an open book. The problem we face is not a need for

<sup>54</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching*, 267.

<sup>55</sup> Kevin DeYoung & Ted Kluck, *Why We are Not Emergent: By Two Guys Who Should Be*, (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2008), 159.

<sup>56</sup> The idea that the message of Christianity is hidden or esoteric knowledge was an early heresy, an attempt to conjoin forms of gnosticism with the gospel. Orthodox Christianity battled and utterly condemned gnosticism in the first and second centuries.



confinement, but a lack of Biblical literacy. Let the world know about it! Proclaim to everyone, every tongue and tribe and nation, to the ends of the earth, rich and poor, sick and well, young and old alike! Let the preacher's authority be judged on the clear visible message of Scripture. Where he is faithful, let his authority be affirmed, and where he is false let it be rejected. God's household is built not on the personality or opinions of the preacher, but "on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:20).

Compromising messages and people-pleasing sermons not only hurt our congregations in the long run, they ruin our own souls, for the simple reason that God will not hold guiltless those who distort the "Word of YHWH." The Scriptures unabashedly guard the teaching of the Word, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1). The preacher, while in the pulpit, acts not primarily as an academician. He is not a social worker. He is not a politician. He is a herald, whose prophetic responsibility lies before God Almighty. If someone possesses skills at clinical psychology, let him be a wise and Godly counselor. If someone has a knack for creative writing and drama, let him be an outstanding author and actor. If someone is blessed as a brilliant academic and has a clear philosophical mind, let him be a careful scholar. But when a man steps into the place of the herald to preach, let him stick faithfully to his task as a herald of the Word of God. God is bringing his Word to His people. To use the pulpit otherwise is not only folly, it is dangerous. Let us take caution we do not find ourselves in ancient company, a company not to be envied. Jeremiah prophesies concerning the false prophets: "They keep saying to those who despise me, 'The Lord says: You will have peace.' And to all who follow the stubbornness of their hearts they say, 'No harm will come to you.' But which of them has stood in the council of the Lord to see or to hear his word? Who has listened and heard his word?" (Jer 23:17-18).

Until we as preachers have "stood in the council of the Lord" and "listened and heard his word" through the faithful study of the Scriptures and prayerful consideration of applications, will we be able to herald with prophetic authority, "Thus saith the Lord!"

### ***Gloria in Excelsis Deo***

One could make up news about almost anyone or anything, but without the authority to back what he says, it is no more than hearsay. Someone could claim any random charismatic figure able to forgive sins and conquer death, to produce new spiritual life in his followers and bring about the restoration of the world, but unless there exists power behind the claim, it has no weight (1 Cor 4:19-20). It loses any true glory.

The glory of preachers is not their own glory. They derive a glory from their message, and that glory is derived from an even greater glory, the glory of God. If the message has weight, it is because God is weighty. The message reveals the good news about God. It reveals His work, His will, and His character manifested through His Son. God is the most glorious and glorified Being conceivable. He alone has the character to fully accomplish the good news He promises and which His preachers proclaim.

God is not just the most glorious Being that now is, He is the most glorious Being that could ever be. As Anselm claimed, He is "a being than which no greater can be conceived." He is the very definition of Glory. He is infinitely glorious Love, He is infinitely glorious Justice, and He is infinitely glorious Holiness. Heralding His message proclaims not only of the most glorious topic that now is, but the most weighty message that can ever be. The message does not originate from a mere mortal; the message originates from an immortal God who possesses perfection in all His attributes, fully capable of accomplishing what He declares. He created the heavens and the earth, who



calls out the starry host by name, and owns the cattle on a thousand hills. The preacher is no more nor less than a herald of this God.

Preaching never stands on its own authority. It claims a derived authority. This authority exists fully in the Master and the message, and not in the messenger. The preacher unapologetically claims absolute truth that must be brought to bear on all people, which by itself smells of conceit. But the preacher must remind people (and himself) that any authority that he wields with his words is an authority that rests with the God for whom he preaches. A preacher, like a Roman procurator, has no authority except what has been given to him from above, which in the preacher's case comes through the proclamation of the Word.

When we preach the message faithfully, we glorify God. We do not add to His glory. God has infinite glory and His glory cannot be increased. To glorify God means to reveal His glory so that people might see and experience it. This then summarizes the purpose of preaching. All human beings were created to know and experience God's infinite glory. It alone offers satisfaction to our existence, as the oft-quoted words of the Westminster Shorter Catechism state: "Q: What is the chief end of man? A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever."<sup>57</sup> When we preach we bring people back to the purpose for which they were created: to see and enjoy God's glory. Ultimately a preacher heralds glory. If God is the most glorious Being there could ever be, and the gospel is the most glorious work He could ever perform on our behalf, and the preacher heralds this message from this God, what could be more weighty than preaching?

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<sup>57</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, Q1.

The ultimate goal of preaching is to produce worship.<sup>58</sup> Jesus clarified that temple worship is no longer tied to a particular place. Christians worship "in spirit and truth" (John 4:23). We recognize God's glory and enjoy it, whatever we do and wherever we do it. The Temple continues not a stone building sitting on Mount Zion, but as a living, breathing people redeemed by the blood of their High Priest; a people from every tongue and tribe and nation. Temple worship means gospel gratitude. It savors the message of salvation. It rejoices in redemption. It awes at our adoption. It is happiness in the hope of the Resurrection. And preaching is all about that message; the message to which we must now turn.

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<sup>58</sup> There is a temptation to want to see evangelism and missions as the ultimate goal of preaching. Yet, this is out of order. Missions and evangelism, as extraordinarily crucial and central they are to the ministry of the church, exist ultimately for God's glory. Consider John Piper's statement, "Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn't. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. Worship, therefore, is the fuel and goal in missions. It's the goal of missions because in missions we simply aim to bring the nations into the white-hot enjoyment of God's glory. The goal of missions is the gladness of the peoples in the greatness of God," *Let the Nations be Glad* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 11.



## CHAPTER 3

### THE STORY OF THE HERALD

#### *Biblical Theology*

He ran thus till he came at a place somewhat ascending, and upon that place stood a cross, and a little below, in the bottom, a sepulcher. So I saw in my dream that just as Christian came up with the cross, his burden loosed from off his shoulders, and fell from off his back, and began to tumble, and so continued to do, till it came to the mouth of the sepulcher, where it fell in, and I saw it no more. Then was Christian glad and lightsome, and said, with a merry heart, 'He hath given me rest by his sorrow, and life by his death.' Then he stood still awhile to look and wonder; for it was very surprising to him that the sight of the cross should thus ease him of his burden. He looked, therefore, and looked again, even till the springs that were in his head sent the waters down his cheeks.

—John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress*

#### ***Leaves, Trees, and the Forest***

As preachers, we sometimes risk missing the forest not only for the trees, but for the leaves. We must remember that every passage, indeed every verse, from Genesis to Revelation, falls into a larger Scriptural story. As heralds of the gospel, every sermon can point to Christ. The suggestion here is not that a preacher needs to narrow his preaching to speak more about the gospel, but to *broaden it*. It is possible to be faithful to a particular segment of the Bible, such as a psalm or an epistle, and yet at the same time lack fidelity to the whole of Scripture.

The message of the Bible encompasses the story of redemption. In a nutshell, it traces the redemptive flow from *Creation* to the *Fall* to the giving of the *Law* to the work of *Christ* all the way to the final *Restoration*. More comprehensively, God has created a world in which human beings exist as His Image bearers, but because of human rebellion and sin, depravity and death has entered the world. The perfect Law of God, given through Moses, reveals not only God's perfect will and character, but also our sinfulness and depravity (as well as glimmers of hope of grace from a merciful God).

Through the coming of Christ, the Son of God, and His work on the cross and the resurrection, salvation is now accomplished for those who repent and turn to him in faith. This salvation results in a restoration towards new life in the Spirit, which will be fully realized upon Christ's return and our resurrection, which will also initiate the renewal and restoration of the *cosmos*.<sup>59</sup>

Otherwise known as Biblical Theology, the Bible's seamless story of Creation, Fall, Law, Christ, and Restoration comprise the story of the gospel, and it stands as the backdrop of every text.<sup>60</sup> To preach "Jesus Christ and him crucified," (1 Cor 2:2) is to keep the whole story in play when working with a passage. Our approach must hold the big picture in mind, so that each piece of the mosaic finds its place within the portrait of the whole. The message of the herald is not sufficient if it stares at a single leaf on a single tree; it must take into view the entire tree, and at times put into sight a panoramic of the whole forest.

This reveals how every sermon can lead to the gospel. The gospel stands behind every passage either in foresight (The Old Testament), hindsight (Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation), or in plain view (the four Gospel writers). Christ reigns over the whole book, and every leaf within it. "The Bible is the greatest storybook, not just because it is full of wonderful stories," Edmund Clowney reminded us, "but because it tells one *great* story, the story of Jesus."<sup>61</sup> The Bible is "more than a bewildering collection of oracles, proverbs, poems, architectural directions, annals, and prophecies.

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<sup>59</sup> Of course, there are numerous eschatological schemes on how the *parousia* will work itself out. Suffice it to say that all Biblical Christians believe in a final return of Christ which will eventually lead to the restoration of Creation.

<sup>60</sup> The delineation of the segments of Biblical Theology varies slightly based on how we want to divide them, and on how specific we wish to be. So for example, Al Mohler in his book on preaching *He is Not Silent* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2008) focuses on only four: creation, fall, redemption, and consummation (see chapter 6 "Did Not Our Hearts Burn Within Us? Preaching the Bible's Big Story"). Mark Dever in his chapter on "Biblical Theology" as one of the 9 marks of a healthy church chooses to follow the story of the Bible as revelation of God's character (creating, holy, faithful, loving, sovereign) *Marks of Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000).

<sup>61</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 1988), 9.



The Bible has a story-line. It traces an unfolding drama."<sup>62</sup> Every text can be exegeted, and every sermon constructed, with this Story in mind:

Only God's revelation could maintain a drama that stretches over thousands of years as though they were days or hours. Only God's revelation can build a story where the end is anticipated from the beginning; and where the guiding principle is not chance or fate, but promise. Human authors may build fiction around a plot they have devised, but only God can shape history to a real and ultimate purpose.<sup>63</sup>

Undoubtedly there are passages where the luminosity of the gospel will appear dimmer than in others, but be mindful Christ still radiates there as well. This rings particularly true of parts deep in the Old Testament, yet we must remember, as John Bright writes, that "the Old Testament is a book that is theologically incomplete; it points beyond itself and ends in a posture of waiting."<sup>64</sup> To preach the Old Testament without Christ is to preach an incomplete message. Regardless of where in Scripture we preach from, the gospel is never disconnected.<sup>65</sup>

Scripture has a message, and the herald bears a responsibility to proclaim that message clearly and comprehensively. He must be content to concentrate on a segment of the larger story, but he must be faithful to proclaim his segment in conjunction with the larger comprehensive story, "The Scriptures present one, consistent, organic message," claims Chapell, "They tell us how we must seek Christ who alone is our Savior and source of strength to be and do what God requires."<sup>66</sup> The

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<sup>62</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery*, 11.

<sup>64</sup> John Bright, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971), 138.

<sup>65</sup> Consider for example preaching through a book as seemingly remote from the gospel as the Song of Solomon. This book is primarily a book about the beauty of God-given romance. It is a love story and a glorious one at that. Yet, we know that the love between lovers is so often tainted with sin (as seen by the woefully high divorce rates, spousal abuse, and infidelity, not to mention the day-to-day peccadilloes even the most loving couple burdens each other with) that the passage cries out for the light of the gospel to illumine the Song. If a preacher preaches through it without once referring to the profound way in which human love between a man and his wife brings out the love of Christ for His bride, a metaphor the New Testament calls upon, he has surely missed the mosaic of Scripture. The Song of Songs, like all books of the Bible, does not exist within a vacuum and should not be preached as if it does. It exists as a beautiful picture of the romantic love between husband and wife, a still-shot within the ongoing narrative of Scripture. The same is true of the historical books, the book of Proverbs, and the Revelation of John.

<sup>66</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 271.

intention is not to add the gospel as a quick tack on to "Christianize" a sermon. T. David Gordon writes, "Perhaps somewhere in the sermon is some mention of Christ; perhaps at the end is an obligatory comment, 'And of course we couldn't do this apart from the grace of God in Christ'—but such a lame comment cannot rescue an essentially moralistic sermon and make it redemptive."<sup>67</sup> The intention should be to faithfulness to the big picture of the whole Bible.

This is not to be identified with a particular system of theology, but as the very heart of Scripture's purpose and Christ's message. Whether one has a covenantal or dispensational perspective, "his gospel is the only message we are to preach."<sup>68</sup> Dispensational or covenantal, in order for the preacher to faithfully exposit his text, he must see how his passage fits within the larger story. Each mini-narrative plays a role in the all-encompassing meta-narrative of the Bible.

As an attempt at a parallel, let us imagine I was responsible to explain to a student one of Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels. To do so, I chose to begin by explaining to her individual segments of the book, which is understandable considering the length of some of Dostoevsky's novels. Let us say I explained to her in detail how the main character had consciously and methodically plotted the murder of an old lady, and after doing so, left the study session without further explanation. I made no mention of whether or not he follows through with the deed, never mind what becomes of the murderer. It would be woefully incomplete. Or let us say instead I attempted to explain the book by describing to her all the gory details of the murder of the two (as it turns out)

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<sup>67</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 81.

<sup>68</sup> John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 42. As a Dispensationalist, MacArthur breaks with extreme Dispensational views that try to sharply divide not only the Testaments but Jesus' own ministry: "There is a tendency, however, for dispensationalists to get carried away with compartmentalizing truth to the point that they make unbiblical differentiations. An almost obsessive desire to categorize and contrast related truths has carried various dispensationalist interpreters far beyond the legitimate distinction between Israel and the church. Many would also draw hard lines between salvation and discipleship, the church and the kingdom, Christ's preaching and the apostolic message, faith and repentance, and the age of law and the age of grace," *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 41.



ladies, without once referring to what motives and actions preceded the crime, or what events followed. Could I say I faithfully explained Dostoevsky's book to her? Even more tormenting would be reading her segments of the internal guilt the main character bears for his crime, and how it continues to psychologically crush him until those around him think he is insane, but speak nothing of his ultimate confession and redemption.

If this were my approach, would I be a faithful teacher of Dostoevsky? Any single segment would not only be an incomplete retelling of the story, it would be inaccurate if portrayed as an adequate summary of the book. As with *Crime and Punishment*, so it is with exposition of Scripture. To be a good expositor and a faithful herald we must keep the whole message in mind, or we risk distorting the gospel.

### ***Back to the Beginning***

We miss the cohesive story of the Bible if we omit human beginnings. Perhaps the biggest flaw with the way Reformed theology is often expressed comes by beginning with Total Depravity rather than Creation.<sup>69</sup> The opening three chapters of the Bible carry a weight far heavier than their length suggests.

Humanity was created in the Image of God, male and female. Human beings arise as the height of God's creation, the apex, climax, and pinnacle of all that he has made. God grants all of creation to us as a stewardship to our care. The Garden represents a perfect paradise, a place where nature and humans live in harmony not

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<sup>69</sup> This is a flaw not with the reformers themselves, but with how their theology is often expressed. Calvin for example outlines a clear Creation theology in the beginning of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Part of the problem has to do with the 'Five Points of Calvinism' which begin with Total Depravity. Historically the Five Points of Calvinism set out by the Synod of Dort in 1619 were never meant as a comprehensive explanation of the Bible, but as a point-by-point response to the Arminian Remonstrance. Ironically, on the point of Total Depravity, Article III of the Remonstrance, there is considerable agreement. See the Heidelberg Catechism Q6 "Did God then create man so wicked and perverse? A: By no means; but God created man good, and after his own image, in true righteousness and holiness, that he might rightly know God his Creator, heartily love him and live with him in eternal happiness to glorify and praise him."

only with each other, but also with their Creator. It is the ultimate picture of serenity and purity. It is the true Home of every human being.

Even after the horror of the Fall, the assumption of Creation stands behind every remaining chapter of the Bible. It is why God continually cares for his people and sees them as valuable. It is what gives dignity to every human being. It is why the Law is always seen as good and glorious. The Law pictures not merely an impossible standard introduced to condemn us, but also embodies the goodness from which we have fallen. It condemns us not only because it demands what we are not, but also because it reveals what we should have been. Our redemption is not God taking what is worthless and giving it worth, but taking what has become unworthy and returning it to its God-given value: Restoration is the great return, the great homecoming for humanity. Ironically, as we leave sin and rebellion, we do not become less human, but more.

Understanding Creation as the beginning of the story also has enormous implications for how we apply the Scriptures. It is why we can look to secular law to be just and equitable. It is why Christians can recognize the beauty and value in secular philosophy, science, and the arts. It gives us the ability to look at every living human being and see hope for redemption. It unites humanity as a whole in a bond of mutual dignity, virtue, and meaning. It gives us a sense that governments, cultures, and society, for all their flaws, are not equally depraved and can improve. The Story cannot be understood with its full weight or in its right context until the preface of Creation is taken into account.

Yet one cannot rejoice in the nostalgia of creation without at the same time remembering the nightmare of the Fall. The transgression of Eden presses upon us the horror of evil. Sin has distorted God's Image-bearer. If we begin with human depravity, then we miss the sinfulness of sin. Depravity must be understood in terms of what is lost, what is forfeited, what is broken. The Image of God is marred, which is more



horrendous than simply abandoned or obliterated. What makes sinful nature so ugly is that it is a distortion of a true image. Compared to a human face, the face of a chimpanzee appears less attractive, but it fits what it is by nature. It is natural, and though compared to that of a woman not as beautiful to our eyes, it appears what it should appear. But a human face that is so contorted and disfigured that it looks like that of a lesser primate is not simply less attractive, it is nightmarish. We, who were intended to live in full-fledged paradise and at peace with God, instead daily belittle our humanity and distort God's image by rebellion and sin. We commit divine iconoclasm. Hate looks so evil because God created us for love. Deception appears so vile because God intended us for truth. Injustice has become so unbearable because God made us for justice.

The Fall, the rebellion of Adam and Eve, marks the transitional point of the Old Testament, even more than the giving of the Law. The Law could only show us our distortion more clearly, like a mirror, but could do nothing to actually restore it. We were not created sinful, but gloriously good, and the Law continually reminds us of our wretched condition. It is not until Christ comes, the Image of God *par excellence* (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), the perfect human, that those *in Christ* begin the restoration process (see e.g. Rom 6, 8:1, 1 Cor 1:2, 15:22; 2 Cor 1:20-21 3:4; 5:17; Gal 3:26-27, 5:6; Eph 1:3-14; 2:8-10; Col 1:28; 2 Tim 2:9). Until the final restoration God is repairing us towards full Image bearing. Paradise lost will become paradise reclaimed.

This begins the story of a herald. Every text after Genesis 3:6 assumes this beginning. The preacher who wants to be faithful to proclaim the Word must exposit his text with this in mind. It is not that every sermon must include an account of creation (though some should); it is that every sermon builds on this theological foreword.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> The Psalms and the Prophets continually refer back to creation when presenting God's revelation (e.g. Psa 19, 136). The apostles tended to preach on Creation particularly when dealing with a pagan audience,

### ***Laying Down the Law***

The Law is a necessary chapter of the herald's message. It is not an addendum. Omit the Law, and we lose the message of the Bible.<sup>71</sup> Christians are continually called to fulfill the Law (Matt 7:12; 22:36-40; Mark 12:29-31; Rom 13:8; Jas 2:8; 1 John 3:11-12). The Torah, which is the rule, guide, and way of God, remains trustworthy, wonderful, perfect and eternal (Pss 19:7-11; 119). The Law reveals to us the election of the patriarchs, the covenants and the promises, the temple worship and sacrifices. Through the Law the character of God shines forth and God's standard of righteousness declared. It is "holy, righteous and good...the law is spiritual" (Rom 7:12, 14; see also 1 Tim 1:8). It is essential. However, the Law without the gospel becomes lethal.

Old Testament stories such as Cain and Abel, Moses and the Ten Commandments, David and Bathsheba, calls to social justice by the prophets, as well as New Testament injunctions behind much of the Sermon on the Mount and the parable of the Good Samaritan, can rightly be preached to Christians with serious moral exhortation. The so-called third use of the Law, its role in the sanctifying work of a Christian's life, is both valuable and necessary as the stake in the heart of antinomianism. But it is wise to remind our hearers that it is the gospel, not the law that enables us to put sin to death.

The message of morality is not by itself good news. Preaching without the gospel is like sending a birth announcement without mentioning the baby, or a bride mailing a wedding invitation with no reference to the groom. Law without gospel is bad

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whom they could not assume had knowledge of Genesis. So for example, the apostle Paul begins his sermon at Athens, "The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands" (Acts 17:24). When dealing with the synagogues, the doctrine of creation could be assumed.

<sup>71</sup> Early heresies arose which tried to pit the message of the New Testament against that of the Hebrew Scriptures. An extreme form of this was Marcionism, which held that the God of the Old Testament was a lesser deity than that of the New Testament. In ad 208, Tertullian wrote *Adversus Marcionem*, successfully condemning Marcionism as heresy.



news. A perfect standard without a perfect savior is fatal news. It is news that brings about condemnation. Not only is it bad news, it is old news. Morality by itself proclaims a typical and stale message and one without life. As Jay Adams is often quoted as saying, "If you preach a sermon that would be acceptable to the member to a Jewish synagogue or to a Unitarian congregation, there is something radically wrong with it."<sup>72</sup> Let us not withhold the good news long when presenting Law. If we do we may find ourselves heralds not of the gospel but heralds of damnation and witnesses of the tragedy of sin. We may find ourselves preaching "a different gospel—which is really no gospel at all" (Gal 1:6-7). It is dangerous to try to squeeze the new wine of the gospel into the old wineskins of the Law. Regenerate preachers should preach regenerate sermons.

### ***Even If We or An Angel from Heaven Should Preach...***

If there is a serious danger in omitting the beginning of the story, and irreparable loss in leaving out the Law, then the greatest danger is omitting the climax of the story, the gospel. Legalism is a constant temptation to the sinful soul, and short-sighted preaching can so often be used as the justification for it. If our exposition is too near-sighted and never sees the peripheral vision of a larger story as it connects to the gospel, we may find ourselves preaching merely on the morality of a passage. Preaching on Law is good, indeed necessary, so long as the larger gospel picture is understood and can reasonably be assumed. The Bible speaks with moral authority and makes numerous ethical claims upon us. Yet these demands exist in the larger Story of gospel, and if preached in a vacuum, will surely lead to legalism in the hearts of our hearers: 'If I do this, I will be right with God.'

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<sup>72</sup> Jay Adams, *Preaching with Purpose* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 147, quoted by Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 268.

It is a dangerous leap to assume that hearers will make the connection between law and gospel on their own. While some may tie things together, even those who do will benefit from the clarity of gospel-centered preaching. A preacher should connect the dots for his hearers, making clear the line between sanctification and justification, goodness and grace, deeds and faith. The further these come apart from each other, the more legalism will stick its ugly head into the gap. Some traditions almost feed this disconnect explicitly, as Graeme Goldsworthy testifies: "This is the practice of some churches to have a 'teaching' sermon in the morning service, and a 'gospel' sermon in the evening. Such a distinction is fraught with danger, for it suggests that the gospel is only what gets us started as a Christian and is confined to evangelistic preaching, while the gospel is unnecessary for teaching Christians."<sup>73</sup> While the preacher must be clear about the moral claims of Scripture, these come as the outworking of a life redeemed in Christ. In the larger story, grace holds the power behind true good works. The Father's moral will and the Spirit's sanctifying work are accomplished by the Son's saving atonement. Grace produces gratitude. The Epistles consistently follow the clear pattern: theology followed by practice, or indicative prefacing imperative.

There exists a tension. Preachers want listeners to understand with crystal clarity the seriousness of sin and the demand Christ's Lordship makes over all aspects of life. We desire people to live self-denying cross-bearing lives fully devoted to discipleship. We want them to know the joy of obedience. However, it is not primarily moral injunctions that will get people there. Ironically, it is the gospel of grace. Tim Keller, pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan recounts his telling conversation with a lady, who came to understand the gospel of grace:

She had always heard that God accepts us only if we are good enough. She said that the new message was scary. I asked her why it was scary, and she

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<sup>73</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy, *Preaching the Whole Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 125.



replied: "If I was saved by my good works then there would be a limit to what God could ask of me or put me through. I would be like a taxpayer with 'rights' — I would have done my duty and now I would deserve a certain quality of life. But if I am a sinner saved by sheer grace—then there's nothing he cannot ask of me." ... She knew that if she was a sinner saved by grace, she was (if anything) more subject to the sovereign Lordship of God. She knew that if Jesus really had done all this for her, she would not be her own. She would joyfully, gratefully belong to Jesus, who provided all this for her at infinite cost to himself.<sup>74</sup>

Connecting holiness to the gospel is not only a safeguard against legalism; it offers the only way we get to true holiness. God is not contented with reluctant obedience, but demands grateful, joyous, loving, worshipful obedience. "God is most glorified in me, when I am most satisfied in Him"<sup>75</sup> is the clarion call of Scripture, as John Piper is fond of saying, and this comes only through the gospel-centeredness. The epistle of James contends that faith without works is dead (2:14-24), but he also reminds us that equally dead is works without faith (2:12-13). "Every good tree bears good fruit" (Matt 7:17). The issue rests on nature rather than nurture. Or, to switch parables, it is the sheep who do good works and end up at Jesus' right hand not the goats, and one does not cease being a goat by acting like a sheep. Sheep are sheep because they are born that way. Rebirth produces true obedience, not perpetual attempts at reformed actions. As the preacher continues to farm the ground of the gospel, the listeners' roots will grow deeper and deeper into its fertile soil, and fruit is bound to flourish.

### ***The Point of the Bible***

We are Christians because we believe the Resurrected Christ stands at the helm of all the Universe. He is Lord, risen and exalted. It is only a matter of time before every knee will bow and every tongue confesses in recognition of his absolute Sovereignty.

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<sup>74</sup> Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 183.

<sup>75</sup> See John Piper's defense of this in *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2003).

He calls all to submission to himself. He owns every square inch of creation.<sup>76</sup> How much should this be true over every word of every sermon? How sad it would be if Christ's own heralds could not find a place for his gospel in the pages of their sermon manuscript. Sermons that leave people without Christ, steal something from the hearers. They steal the savor of the Savior. They rob them of the nourishment of the Good Shepherd. They deny them the fount of living water, and offer them only broken cisterns that can hold no water (Jer 2:13). They leave the 'good' out of the good news.

Every story has a climax, a great turning point, a 'must read' section. It is the point that most captivates the listener's attention. It is where the entire plot comes together. In many stories it is the great battle scene, the part of the story where the hero finally emerges victorious over the villain. Or it may be the great love scene, when the two lovers are finally united after struggle and separation. It is not only what people remember most about the story; it is how they remember what the story was all about. It defines everything else. In the Bible, that scene is clearly the cross and resurrection of Christ. He is what the story is about. He is why the Book exists.

Preaching on the literary point of a passage is only part of the work of a herald. The book, psalm, or epistle itself exists within a Book. That Book has a point as well. The point of the Bible is to reveal the gospel, from beginning to end. Exposition exists with this goal in mind. All faithful sermonizing heads toward this direction. As C. H. Spurgeon famously said, "I take my text and make a bee-line to the cross." This was Christ's own perspective. He gives a harsh rebuke to those who believe otherwise, "You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life." (John 5:39-40). Jesus says of the Pharisees who studied the Hebrew Scriptures

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<sup>76</sup> As Abraham Kuyper is so often quoted as saying, "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'"



diligently and methodically they had never heard God's voice. Jesus believed that the Scriptures had a resounding message behind every verse. He saw his own death and resurrection as so evident from the Hebrew Scriptures that he dismays over how the disciples could ever have missed it. As he walked with a couple of disciples after the resurrection, his identity concealed, he admonishes them, "How foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" Luke adds, "...beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself" (Luke 24:25-27). According to the apostle Peter, the Hebrew prophets knew the glory of the gospel more than they are often given credit for:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you, when they spoke of the things that have now been told you by those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven. Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Pet 1:10-12)

It is not only the Old Testament that bee-lines to this message, the New Testament writers were preachers of retrospect. The heart of their content was not a message of progressive revelation for the church, but as the apostle Paul says, "We preach Christ crucified" (1 Cor 1:23). This is what being a preacher is all about, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." (1 Cor 2:2). John tells us:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us (1 John 1:1-2).

The New Testament apostles did not see themselves as men with a multitude of messages, but with a single sermon, which was inscribed throughout the whole of

Scripture. When doing the work of exposition, our ultimate goal is to bee-line to the cross. This deserves further explanation.

### ***Heralding the Wrath of God***

Preachers, as uncomfortable, unpopular, or unwelcomed as it may be, must herald the wrath of God upon sin (Rom 1:18-3:20; Eph 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 2:16; Jude 1:13; Rev 19:15). The gospel has become necessary because of sin. If there were no such thing as sin, there would be no gospel. We find no clearer teaching in all of Scripture than the doctrine of sin. In Ephesians 2:1-3, our plight is described:

As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.

Or simply, "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom 3:23). The London Times asked several authors including G. K. Chesterton to write an essay on the topic, "What's Wrong with the World?" to which Chesterton responded simply, "Dear Sirs, I am. Sincerely, G. K. Chesterton."<sup>77</sup> He was not being facetious; he was being profoundly Christian. The fallen-ness of the world stems from individual sinfulness. All of humanity stand totally depraved, not meaning we are as sinful as we possible could be, as glimpses of goodness exist in even the most sinister human being. The depravity is total not in depth but in breadth, as sin infects every vessel of life. Sin is a universal plague, touching every culture, community, and individual.

God however, is not sinful. He remains Holy and Perfect and Just. And, as such, His righteous response to our sin is *wrath*. The wrath of God is, as Stott defines it,

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<sup>77</sup> Cited in Philip Yancey, *Soul Survivor* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 58.



"God's settled and perfectly righteous antagonism to evil."<sup>78</sup> It is the deadly side of the goodness of God. It is the flaming sword exiling us from Eden. It is the cup of the fury of God prepared for the idolatrous nations. It unsheathes the double-edged sword from the Son of Man's mouth. "God is a righteous judge, a God who expresses his wrath every day" (Ps 7:11), for our God is a consuming fire (Heb 12:29). Ed Welch writes truly, "We need more sermons that leave us trembling."<sup>79</sup>

Sadly, the issue is often confused, as God's character is put at odds with itself. Can God be loving and wrathful? Leon Morris, in the conclusion of his pivotal work a generation ago, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, writes:

We saw that the Bible has a great deal to say about the wrath of God, and that it leaves us in no doubt as to the fact that, although God is a God of love, yet He does not regard sin complacently, as something which does not matter greatly. On the contrary, sin calls forth the implacable hostility of His holy nature, and until something is done about it this puts the sinner in an unenviable position.<sup>80</sup>

God's wrath is an extension of his goodness. God's pure holiness demands wrath against sin. When perfect Justice comes in contact with lawless transgression, tables are turned over and money-changers are driven out. God by his very nature must judge rebellion. And sinners are the rightful objects of his wrath. "Unenviable" is a gross understatement. This is why we need the gospel, because in our sin we are objects of wrath. Preachers simply cannot avoid heralding the wrath of God and remain faithful to their message.

The result of this wrath is death. It is the wages of sin (Rom 6:23). As the Puritan Richard Sibbes put it simply "We cannot live long in this world. We owe God a death. We owe nature a death. The sentence of death is passed upon us." Sin

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<sup>78</sup> John Stott, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1994), 75. Similarly is Leon Morris "...the biblical writers habitually use for the divine wrath a word which denotes not so much a sudden flaring up of passion which is soon over, as a strong and settled opposition to all that is evil arising out of God's very nature." *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale Press, 1955), 162-163.

<sup>79</sup> Ed Welch, *When People are Big and God is Small* (Phillisburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1997), 96.

<sup>80</sup> Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale Press, 1955), 277. For a further description of how the wrath of God relates to atonement, see his two chapters on 'Propitiation'.

deserves wrath, wrath requires death, and death produces atonement. This is seen at the very beginning of Scripture, where God cautions, "you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Gen 2:17).

Death was the only just punishment for human sin. R. C. Sproul asks:

Was it unjust for God to say to Adam and Eve that they would die when they sinned? Think about it. Was it evil for God to impose the death penalty for all sin? If you say yes, be careful. If you say yes, you are saying it as an expression of the very fallen, sinful nature that exposes you to the death penalty in the first place. If you say yes, you slander the character of God. If you say yes, you do violence to His holiness. If you say yes, you have never come to grips with what sin is. We must not say yes. We must say no and say it with conviction.<sup>81</sup>

It is on the cross of Christ that this wrath is satisfied by substitution "as a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45; see also 1 Tim 2:6; Heb 9:15).

Many have pointed to the cross of Christ as the most powerful portrayal of God's character. Bonhoeffer could say from a Nazi prison, "the idea that God himself suffers is far and away the most convincing piece of Christian doctrine."<sup>82</sup> John Stott could write "I could never myself believe in God, if it were not for the cross. The only God I believe in is the one Nietzsche ridiculed as 'God on the cross'. In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?"<sup>83</sup> The cross is the greatest demonstration of the wrath of God, and simultaneously of the love of God. The cross stands not only at the theological center of Christianity, but the existential. God does care about our suffering. He knows our suffering. He bore our suffering.

### ***The Impolite Atonement***

By necessity the preacher will have to preach about creepy things if he wishes to be faithful to the Scriptures. Priests, altars, incense, rituals, and sacrifice play a central

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<sup>81</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 1998), 115.

<sup>82</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

<sup>83</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-varsity Press, 1986), 335.



role in the Story. They are sprinkled, like the blood of a lamb, throughout the pages of the Bible, and must therefore likewise be sprinkled in the sermons of a faithful preacher. The priesthood, the Temple artifacts, the animal sacrifices exist for a primary purpose: to foreshadow the cross. The cross is atonement, a payment or retribution for sin. When we sin, some payment or punishment must be made to God for that sin, for "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins." (Heb 9:22). In order for forgiveness of sins to occur, something or someone must die. Archaic, violent, barbarous, and uncivilized as it might sound to our ears, it is essential. Good works, positive attitudes, or perpetual apologies do not achieve atonement. It is achieved through death: The blood shed snuffing out of life, the scapegoat slaughtered in the sight of sinners. Sadly, many preachers have tried to wipe away the bloodstains from the pages of the Bible. The atonement remains one of the most controversial subjects dealt with by preachers.

Perhaps one of the reasons preachers shy away from the atonement has to do with its impoliteness. When I say impolite, I do not mean forgetting to say 'Thank you' or slurping your soup. I mean barbarically impolite. Imagine if we could bring to the present day a savage from the dark ages: raggedly clothed, unshaven, smelly and hairy. Then imagine he is invited unwashed to a dinner-party, sitting in his animal skins side by side with tuxedos and evening gowns. As everyone begins to eat, he grabs hold of his food with his bare hands and grunts his way through his meal. The conversation all around him turns to silence as people begin to stare and lose their appetites. Everyone feels uncomfortable around him, and many want him to leave. Subtle comments are made, 'Who invited him?' 'Does he have to be here?' But most are not willing to be so crude as to ask him to leave (though a few, as of late, have become more bold). But the host, loved and respected by all, calls everyone's attention to their guest of honor, which is none other than the savage himself. All plans of enjoying the dinner-party without him are spoiled. And thus he remains, noticed by all, unwanted by many, lauded by the host.

Such is the doctrine of the atonement: a misfit among moral systems; a teaching that does not fit neatly into postmodern ethics of tolerance and relativism. The cross is blatantly unsophisticated. This has always been the case, as the apostle Paul said, “we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). But there it remains at the crux of the story of the herald: a tale of the broken bloody body of a crucified messiah, innocent and executed in the place of the guilty. The Lord of Hosts continually points us to this frightening moment and calls us to fix our eyes upon the murdered King.

The animal sacrifices in the Old Testament just foreshadowed the true sacrifice that was to come in our behalf. Atonement does not come from animals. Killing a sheep or a goat or a bull does not free us of the guilt of sin. “...it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Heb 10:4). All that blood and death and gore was just a picture of the sacrifice God would provide in our place. The real *Yom Kippur*, or Paschal Lamb, or Sin Offering, would come in Jesus’ death. The apostle John in his letters tells us, “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:10, ESV). The atonement is Christ.

Preaching is heralding the gospel, and the atonement is the heart of that gospel. The apostle Paul in defining the gospel to the Corinthians starts off simply, “Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3). J. I. Packer describes the atonement as “the best part of the best news that the world has ever heard.”<sup>84</sup> The atonement should be at the center of the preaching ministry. “The preachers’ commission is to declare the whole counsel of God,” writes Packer, “but the cross is the center of that counsel, and the Puritans knew that the traveler through the Bible

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<sup>84</sup> J. I. Packer, “Penal Substitution Revisited” *In His Place Condemned He Stood* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 22.



landscape misses his way as soon as he loses sight of the hill called Calvary.”<sup>85</sup> How can the preacher avoid preaching on the atonement clearly and often? If every message should hold high the light of the gospel of grace, let us remember that the atonement ignites the fiery torch that makes that light possible.

### ***Cross-examination of Preachers***

As preachers, have we reflected carefully on our own souls? Have we received God’s grace in saving sinners? Have we cried to God like the tax-collector “Have mercy on me a sinner”? Do our hearts echo John Newton’s amazement at grace: “My memory is nearly gone; but I remember two things; That I am great sinner, and that Christ is a great Saviour”? There is no preaching without the cross. We would be heralds with no message. If we have not first personally come to grips with the state of our sinful souls and our need of a sinless Savior, and have not trusted in Christ’s atoning work for us, then the rest of the Bible is gibberish. Consider carefully the application of the message before you consider the implication of preaching it.

Some writers call the atonement “cosmic child abuse.”<sup>86</sup> ‘How can God punish someone else for what we have done wrong?’ But there is a fundamental perversion here. Such a designation does not grasp that the glory of the cross is not that God sacrificed *another* for the benefit of Himself, but rather sacrificed Himself for the benefit of *another*. It is this sacrifice that holds all Christian doctrine together. The accusation of the injustice of the atonement does carry some weight. The weight is not against God, but against us. It is God who receives the injustice on behalf of us who deserve it. R. C. Sproul is correct:

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<sup>85</sup> J I Packer, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1990).

<sup>86</sup> Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 182-183, quoted by *Pierced for Our Transgressions* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 327. The Father punishing His Son in behalf of us is seen as unjust and cruel. The accusation does not take into consideration that the Son as a fully conscious adult willingly lays down His life for us, by His own choice. Certainly one does not accuse a marine or fireman as unjust and cruel who gives up his own life to save others.

The most violent expression of God's wrath and justice is seen in the Cross. If ever a person had room to complain of injustice, it was Jesus. He was the only innocent man ever to be punished by God. If we stagger at the wrath of God, let us stagger at the Cross. Here is where our astonishment should be focused. If we have cause for moral outrage, let it be directed at Golgotha.<sup>87</sup>

Cultural appeasers belittle the atonement because it is violent, "The Bible never defines God as anger, power or judgement—in fact it never defines him as anything other than love."<sup>88</sup> The Father requiring the death of His Son for forgiveness is grotesque and gruesome and gratuitous.

They prefer a sanitized religion. To such scathing criticism we have to say in response: they are right. The atonement is not polite and nice and respectable. The atonement is violent, and bloody, and barbaric. We have to add that it is also necessary and redeeming and glorious because the atonement is God saving us from our sins. It is our only hope as sinners. Without the shedding of blood no forgiveness of sins is available. God's justice demands death for sin. As sinners we are objects of wrath. If you take away the death of Christ from us, we have nothing, no forgiveness. We are sinners with no atonement. At the heart of the preacher's message stands not a modern (or pre-modern or post-modern) philosophy. We do not find a list of morals and rituals. We find a story, a meta-narrative of history, whose climax comes with an ancient tale of a murdered Deity whose blood-stained cross buys back sinners for Himself. There it stands in the center of the dinner-party in all its impoliteness: the masterpiece of the Story of God. This is what we preach. Spurgeon put it well to his students:

Beloved brethren, we must be most of all clear upon the great soul-saving doctrine of the *atonement*; we must preach a real bona fide substitutionary sacrifice, and proclaim pardon as its result. Cloudy views as to atoning blood are mischievous to the last degree; souls are held in unnecessary bondage, and saints are robbed of the calm confidence of faith, because they are not definitely told that "God hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." We must preach substitution

<sup>87</sup> R. C. Sproul, *The Holiness of God*, 121

<sup>88</sup> Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 63 quoted by *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, 286.



straightforwardly and unmistakably, for if any doctrine be plainly taught in Scripture it is this, --"The chastisement of our peace was upon Him, and with His stripes we are healed." "He, His own self, bare our sins in His own body on the tree." This truth gives rest to the conscience by showing how God can be just, and the justifier of him that believeth. This is the great net of gospel fishermen: the fish are drawn or driven in the right direction by other truths, but this is the net itself.<sup>89</sup>

Christ died for our sins. This is the heart of the gospel. What could be more glorious and preach-worthy than this!? As heralds of good news how can we stray long from this subject? "God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21). The lamb who was slain will be the subject of the song of eternity.

### ***The End of the Beginning***

As we preach, let us never forget the ending. The Story is not over yet, and the best is yet to come. As preachers, we must point people to the end of the story. The resurrection of Christ is the first fruits of the resurrection of us all! Christ has died, Christ is risen, *Christ will come again*. We have the privilege of knowing how the Story ends while living it out midstream. Part of the prophetic proclamation of preaching is foretelling, and we have been given vision of what is still to come.

Life is not a cycle but a plane. It has sides. It is as wide as the Universe, and as long as time. It has a beginning and an end. And that end is a definitive mark in the Story. For all of us it will mean facing what we have loved most in this world, God or Sin, for we cannot serve two Masters. The preacher must be clear about hell. It is the eternal punishment for the wicked. It is a place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth," where the "worm does not die," and the soul's 'being' is best described as death. To borrow a verse from Tolkien, it is to be bound in the darkness "where the shadows lie." For those without Christ as savior, it is being damned to an eternity of what is most

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<sup>89</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954) 339.

deeply feared in this life: Accountability. It is God forsakenness for those who forsake God. It is a place of self-prescribed freedom from God, and therefore from his love and grace, where self-enchained slavish rebellion continues with no end. It is a place where, as Dante wrote, the sign over the entrance reads, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." The final 'Day of the Lord' is a dreadful day for those naked in sin. And yet as dark as this day looks for those who face a Christ-less eternity, it is that much brighter for all those dressed in Christ. It is a day of hope. It is the final Great Awakening.

Hope should saturate our sermons like water in a sponge. Our hope rests not in this world alone, but in a place prepared for us by Christ, when we will no longer see as in a mirror dimly, but face to face, knowing fully even as we are fully known. For those who have faith in Christ, the end means resurrection into the joy of their master. If there is no hope of resurrection, "our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor 15:14). But Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! Our faith is not futile, Christians are not to be pitied more than all men, and those who have fallen asleep in Christ are not lost. The drama of the Scriptures is not a tragedy; it does not end in defeat. Sophocles and Shakespeare may love tragic conclusions, but God loves fairy-tale endings. His story ends in glorious victory. It ends with a white rider called Faithful and True, who brings righteous judgment to the world upon sin and injustice. It ends with a new beginning, the beginning of the eternal end, "which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."<sup>90</sup> It ends with restoration, a New Heaven and a New Earth, where "there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain." It ends with the tree of life accessible once again to God's Image bearers. It ends not in waiting, or while longing, or with incompleteness. It ends in "Amen" (Rev 22:21). This is the story of a herald.

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<sup>90</sup> C S Lewis, *The Last Battle*, the final words of *The Chronicles of Narnia*.



*Part II: Faithful Preaching in Practice*

## CHAPTER 4

### THE ART OF THE HERALD

#### *The Craft of Communication*

Fast by the oracle of God, I thence  
Invoke thy aid to my adventurous song...  
...What in me is dark  
Illumine, what is low raise and support,  
That, to the height of this argument,  
I may assert Eternal Providence,  
And justify the ways of God to men.  
--John Milton, *Paradise Lost*

#### ***An Art not a Science***

Perhaps you have gotten the impression thus far that we should approach preaching as a dry science: the herald dissects the pieces of Scripture, carefully labeling various parts and then tacking them on display before a congregation. In doing so there is no creativity, no craft, no art. This is certainly not the case. Faithful heralding not only opposes this sort of sterile approach, it demands being treated as an art. To dissect something is to kill it, but the writer to the Hebrews tells us, "For the Word of God is living and active. Sharper than any two edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart" (Heb 4:12). It would seem that the Word, rather than us, does the dissecting.

#### ***Language***

Language allows us a potent medium. The preacher must use language to select, interpret, and explain the Scriptures. The way he does so becomes extremely important for how people receive the message. The herald does exist, and cannot simply remove himself from the preaching equation. Even if he merely read the Scriptures, his tone, volume, and emotion would effect how his hearers receive the



Word. His job then employs the use of language to communicate the ideas of Scripture as faithfully as he possibly can. This takes wisdom, skill, and art. Good preaching, like good writing, should use words carefully and sparingly:

Omit needless words. Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.<sup>91</sup>

Verbosity is an enemy in preaching. Hearers should walk away from a sermon surprised at how much can be said in such a short time, rather than how little can be said in such a long time.

Language contains great power. Postmodern fear of using language to control people is not without merit. It is no surprise that people have become increasingly skeptical of the media's power today. "The News" does not come to us directly, but through a messenger. That messenger has the power to select and ignore, interpret and explain the events in various words and images. He may do so to someone or something's advantage: his company, his sponsors, his political party, his nation, his wallet. Fresh facts may easily turn into putrid propaganda. But just as the task of journalism is not hopeless, neither is the art of a herald. There is no such thing as unbiased journalism, but degrees of clarity and accuracy exist. Who cannot tell the difference between a spin-doctor and a competent earnest news reporter? The preacher strives for his language to stick as close to the purpose of the text. The skill of utilizing language for faithful proclamation becomes an experience-forged one. This is a vocation-long process.

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<sup>91</sup> William Strunk & E. B. White, *The Elements of Style* (New York, NY: Macmillan, 1979), 23.

## ***The Chef and the Recipe***

The preacher's goal is simplicity not complexity, "The sermon has most learning in it that has most plainness. Hence it is that a great scholar was wont to say, 'Lord, give me learning enough, that I may preach plain enough.'<sup>92</sup> To do this is the art of exposition. The example of Ezra and the Levites should be dear to the preacher's heart, "They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read" (Neh 8:8). The end goal of exegesis, like cooking a meal, is to bring forth a well-prepared and nourishing product. Then the preacher can let the people "taste and see that the Lord is good" (Ps 34:8). To do this faithfully takes the art of heralding.

A preacher need not display all his work in the study out in the pulpit. Instead, his study work should make his pulpit work palatable. Even as a chef who prepares a dish in the kitchen does not need to show off the ingredients to his dinner guests, so the preacher does not need to display his exegesis to his hearers. The specific ingredients and the recipe for its preparation are essential for the meal, but one does not need to know every spice it contains for it to nourish her.

Ofentimes displaying too much of the recipe needlessly confuses. The preacher who mentions too many Greek and Hebrew terms, lists off an abundance of German and French commentators, and quotes extensively from *Josephus* and *Philo*, has made the text seem inaccessible to his hearers. Spurgeon jests, "Christ said, 'Feed my sheep...feed my lambs.' Some preachers, however, put the food so high that neither lambs nor sheep can reach it. They seem to have read the text, 'Feed my giraffes.'<sup>93</sup> One of the worst comments a preacher can receive after preaching is the genuine

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<sup>92</sup> Attributed to Joshua Shute, quoted by Charles H. Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 350.

<sup>93</sup> From Ed. W. Williams, *Reminiscences*, 145 quoted by John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 147.



gratitude of a caring member that goes something like this, 'Thank you for your sermon pastor. It was so brilliant, so intelligent, so learned, I could never begin to understand it. I am so glad that we have someone like you who understands the true meaning of the Bible, as we would be lost without you.'<sup>94</sup> This statement should be chilling to someone trying to be a good expositor. The preacher's exposition should design to let the meaning arise from the text clear as the day, and inviting the hearers to look outside with their own eyes to see it.

Theological language especially should be used sparingly and for precision. There is a not-so-fine line between theological clarity and theological snobbery. Theological language is intended for the former never the latter. If the desire to mention a phrase in the original language or to use cumbersome theological nomenclature arises, the preacher should ask himself 'Why include this?' Is it truly necessary for clarifying the idea of the text, or is it an attempt to show off what he knows? Is this helpful in order for those listening to know God more? The word choice should be appropriate for the audience. Helmut Thielicke caricatures the humorous yet hurtful development in theological students to try to show off their erudition:

Picture a lively, active young man on good terms with his fellows in the youth work of his church. He has met Jesus Christ and now must bear witness. And so he is already occasionally leading devotions, for which he does not study commentaries, although he is careful enough to go through the printed aids which are available for such purposes, and he perhaps asks his pastor a question or two. For the rest he prays that God will grant him a right understanding of everything and keep him from speaking nonsense...

When he comes home after his first semester [of theological training], in the eyes of his former companions he has suddenly and horribly changed. If one

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<sup>94</sup> D. Martin Lloyd-Jones writes of a similar situation, "You may remember the story of the poor woman leaving a service in a famous church in Edinburgh where a great and learned professor had been preaching. Somebody asked her on the way out whether she had enjoyed the sermon, and on her saying that she had, asked her further, 'Were you able to follow him?' To which she replied, 'Far be it from me to presume to understand such a great man as that!'" *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 121-122, as does Haddon Robinson, "One day a woman wounded me with a compliment: 'I just love to hear you preach. In fact, when I see the insights you get from the original languages, I realize that my English Bible is hardly worth reading.' I went home asking myself, *What have I done? I'm trying to get people into their Bibles, but I've taken this lady out of hers.*" Haddon Robinson & Craig Brian Larson, eds., "Blending Bible Content And Life Application" *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 295.

of them, the young artisan, conducts Bible study that is highly lay in character, there he sits with the corners of his mouth drawn down. On their way home together afterward he explains to him – like a gossip who is almost bursting under the weight of her news – what ‘the latest investigation’ has produced on the subject of myth, legend, and form-history. And even before the other has recovered from his momentary horror, he classifies him by that clerical typology that he has picked up in the lobby of his lecture hall. He says to his unlearned friend: ‘What you said was ‘typically pietistic,’ or ‘typically orthodox,’ or maybe ‘Methodistic.’” He says to him: ‘You belong to the school of Osiander, which has not yet comprehended the forensic character of justification,’ –and he patronizingly explains to him the strange learned words, which are the questionable by-products of his scientific study.

When he comes home after his third semester –meanwhile his friend is too embarrassed ever again to launch his naïve exegesis in the presence of those profoundly knowing ears – he is invited to tackle a Bible-study hour himself.<sup>95</sup>

Just as a painter’s primary goal should not be to become a famous artist, but rather to speak meaningfully through her artwork, how much more so the art of preaching.

Successful communication is the goal of our art. The herald should work vigorously and tirelessly, not to demonstrate to people that he is a vigorous and tireless worker, but to communicate the Word faithfully.

### ***A Good illustration illustrates Well***

Illustrations are the stories, metaphors and images we use to help clarify biblical ideas in a sermon. Every preacher uses them. Jesus used them, “You are the salt of the earth” (Matt 5:13). Paul used them, “a thorn in my flesh” (2 Cor 12:7). The prophets used them, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow” (Isa 1:18). We use them, sometimes without even knowing it. The human mind needs them. We can only deal so long in the abstract before we begin to lose concentration.

Do not think for a moment that serious expository preaching is in any sense in opposition to using illustrations. It will certainly have an effect on the type of illustrations we use, and why we use them, but illustrations are a necessary component of

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<sup>95</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *A Little Exercise for young Theologians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1962), 7-8.



preaching. Exposition is about faithfully proclaiming the point of a passage, and that idea is often made clear when illumined by a timely illustration. Faithful exposition of the text and clear communication of its message is the goal, and using illustrations offers a wise strategy to achieve that goal. Think of each illustration as a tool. The herald has a job (heralding the Word), and whatever tools he finds useful in fulfilling his duty should be considered. Some tools may be appropriate to the work, others inappropriate for the job. It does no good to hammer a bolt, nor to screw in a nail. If the tool works to get the project done, use it; if it makes the work even more laborious, discard it.

Robinson is correct, "there is no such thing as 'a good illustration,' but only a good illustration of a particular truth."<sup>96</sup> Illustrations have a particular purpose: they illustrate something. Their value is determined in how well they are able to do this. Imagine hiring an illustrator to paint pictures for a new children's book. After working for months with her she finishes her illustrations and shows you a portfolio of magnificent pictures. They look artistic, they look beautiful, they look engaging, but they have nothing to do with your children's book. They are not good illustrations. They are useless in clarifying the ideas of your message. A good illustration illustrates. Says Spurgeon:

Windows greatly add to the pleasure and agreeableness of a habitation, and so do illustrations make a sermon pleasurable and interesting. A building without windows would be a prison rather than a house, for it would be quite dark, and no one would care to take it upon lease; and in the same way, a discourse without a parable is prosy and dull, and involves a grievous weariness of the flesh.<sup>97</sup>

Illustrations are important, and their importance is how well they illustrate. The purpose of a good window, as Spurgeon tells us, is to shed light into a room, not to be itself the center of attention. A bright sunlit sitting room should be an atmosphere where people see each other as they converse, not a place to marvel at the transparency of the

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<sup>96</sup> Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 154-155

<sup>97</sup> C H Spurgeon, *Lectures to My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 350.

windows. In the same way illustrations should not draw attention to themselves, but upon that which they are shedding light. The Scripture (and ultimately Christ whom it reveals) sits with your hearer in that room. Let the illustration, like a window, allow the light to reveal Him clearer.

People love engaging illustrations. We as preachers should know this firsthand, because we are human! We ourselves love hearing a well-narrated story. We identify ourselves in stories. Stories engage us. They captivate our attention. They create a sense of interest and fascination in a way that straight rhetoric cannot. Even brief metaphors can generate enormous interest. Take the statement, 'God is not a vending machine.' That metaphor by itself grabs attention and creates interest and a desire to know more: 'Why would anyone think God is like a vending machine? What do vending machines and God have in common, and, therefore, what distinction is he trying to make? What is the preacher trying to say here? Please tell me more.' Compare that to the statement, 'God does not always answer our prayers the way we expect.' Both may make the same point, yet the metaphor engages our interest in a way the flat discourse does not.

The use of illustrations comes with some consequences. Illustrations can be so powerful that they actually draw attention away from the central idea. They convey ideas in addition to and often different from what they intend to illustrate. If people in hearing an illustration dwell more on the illustration than the idea it was meant to illustrate, it has failed as a meaningful illustration. Sometimes illustrations present new ideas, which can distract from the Biblical idea, or even contradict it. The window becomes more translucent than transparent, shading or blocking the light of the sun and obscuring the objects in the room.



Imagine a preacher who wants to illustrate David's cry for repentance, "Create in me a clean heart, O God. And renew a steadfast spirit within me." (Psa 51:10). He illustrates:

God is like a surgeon. He opens up our chests and performs an intense heart transplant. He inserts the scalpel ever so carefully. He opens up our ribcage, and though he nearly kills us in the process, he is able to remove our sick hearts and replace them with a healthy heart in a seamless sequential artform, so as to keep us from going into shock or cardiac arrest. Afterwards we are left with a lengthy recovery period from the alteration. We will immediately require a blood transfusion to survive the immense loss of blood. What is more we will never lose the scars, but thank God when the transplant is done, it is done. We shall live on with a new heart. We have been revived.

The image of a surgeon engages. It catches the attention of the hearers in a way that many can understand. But does it convey the Biblical idea? *More or less.* Does it also create a distraction from the idea? *Most likely.* Does it convey other ideas foreign to the biblical idea? *Definitely.* In hearing this, many probably walk away not only thinking of the new spiritual life that David prays for and God offers, but of the dangerous surgery and painful recovery associated with a heart transplant. One may make an argument that this danger and pain has spiritual parallels as well, but it goes beyond merely illustrating the big idea at hand. In the end people have probably not walked away with "Create in me a clean heart," but with a literal picture of blood and organs, a painful sense of the recovery, and a fear of the process.

### ***Quoth Raven, 'Nevermore'***

Poe's ominous bird may speak as his herald of a dark sorrow, but God's heralds may quote in order to enlighten the Word. Nothing seems more valuable than a perfectly worded quote. Yet, what is true of illustrations proves true of quotes. Let them illumine the message, and never detract from it. Quotes, like illustrations, should only be used to allow the light of the Word to shine in more brightly.

The first source of quotes is the Scriptures. Letting Scripture illumine Scripture is invaluable, as God's Word by its very nature is revealing. It reveals, like a well-lit torch, God's will, as the Psalmist prayed, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path," (Ps 119:105) and as Proverbs claims, "For these commands are a lamp, this teaching is a light" (Prov 6:23). The preacher would be wise to light his message with the lamp of Scripture. When the preacher quotes Scripture he is not quoting an imperfect source, but an infallible one, for "The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul" (Ps 19:7). The Word is intrinsically powerful to transform us, as Jesus prayed "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth" (John 17:17). This does not mean that a sermon should be filled with Bible verses, scattered throughout like freckles on the face of the sermon. Quoting too extensively outside of the passage preached can be confusing if the presence of the quote is not justified, and the meaning not explained.

The preacher should not feel limited to Scripture when it comes to quotes, as the Biblical authors themselves did not feel this constriction.<sup>98</sup> Extra-biblical quotes should be added just like an extra-biblical illustration, with consideration of its advantage to communicate the Scripture. Quotes however have the added responsibility of bringing in fellow-heralds to your message. To quote others is to borrow their words, and their persona, for your service. When quoting, a preacher musters together a team of friends to his task, not only from the present, but also from the past. "It is the democracy of the dead,"<sup>99</sup> writes Chesterton. He is recognizing the limitations of himself, and looking to the help of others. A quorum of quotes does not make a subject true, but it does offer support for the preacher. It demonstrates that you are not alone as a herald on a particular understanding of Christian doctrine, and that, as C. S. Lewis quipped, "two

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<sup>98</sup> As a few examples, in Acts 17:32-34 the apostle Paul quotes from an inscription on the altar in the Areopagus, from Epimenides of Crete, and from Aratus's poem *Phainomena*. Jude in his short letter quotes from the pseudopigraphical *Book of Enoch*. While writing to Titus, Paul quotes Epimenides again in a rather unflattering reference to Cretans, "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons" (Titus 1:12)!

<sup>99</sup> G. K. Chesterton wrote this concerning looking to the past for wisdom, *Orthodoxy* (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2004), 40.



heads are better than one, not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction."<sup>100</sup>

Others often have something insightful to add to the truth, whether or not we agree with them in whole or even whether or not they are Christians at all. Oftentimes wisdom can be found even in the counsel of a pagan writer, who may even more aptly state something than a Christian. This being the case, generally speaking the hearer will give some leeway to the preacher that quoting someone does not mean he agrees with everything this person says. Yet whom we quote does give a certain approval to their thinking, and it would be dangerous to allow the majority of our quotes to come from secular philosophers, leaders of other religions, politicians, or most dangerous of all, Hollywood. Spiritual ailments need healthy doctors, and a listener may rightly complain as did Augustine, "I absolutely refuse to allow these philosophers to take care of my sick soul, because they are without the saving name of Christ."<sup>101</sup>

Sometimes quotes support your big idea even in spite of the person quoted. Quoting the irony of an atheist's statement, or the evident perversion in the words of a protagonist to the point of the passage can be a valuable tool, if it is clear that you are disavowing their perspective. For example, when preaching on Job and suffering, one might quote Harold Kushner's national best-selling book *When Bad things Happen to Good People*:

Are you capable of forgiving and loving God even when you have found out that He is not perfect, even when He has let you down and disappointed you by permitting bad luck and sickness and cruelty in His world, and permitting some of those things to happen to you? Can you learn to love and forgive Him despite His limitations, as Job does, and as you once learned to forgive and love your parents even though they were not as wise, as strong, or as perfect as you needed them to be?<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> C. S. Lewis, Introduction to St. Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Orthodox Theological Seminary, 1989), 5.

<sup>101</sup> Paraphrased from St. Augustine, *The Confessions*, Book V.

<sup>102</sup> Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1981), 148.

The purpose of the quote would be to demonstrate a highly deficient view of God and of suffering, foreign to the theme of Job. A preacher can bring in a quote to demonstrate how *not* to understand the passage.

Yet, care should be taken as to how and whom we quote. The people we quote can change a sermon if they act as triggers that cause distraction from the text. Some names are highly loaded and often too explosive to make a point. With the careless use of quotes, the initial intention of the sermon may evolve into something one step removed from the exposition of the passage, even if the quote is rhetorically pleasing. It can be true of sermons that "from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved."<sup>103</sup> The herald should be mindful that people carry personalities beyond their quote (as in the last quote by Charles Darwin). Quoting the comics on any subject will carry with it a certain perception of its own, one radically different than quoting Kiegergaard or Schleiermacher, even if the quote sounds similar. Quoting the latter theologians about, say, parenting, or the comics about, say suffering, is awkward if not outright offensive. The preacher should be careful that he does not say more than he wants to say by whom he quotes.

Quotes and illustrations are extremely valuable, but the overuse even of appropriate quotes and illustrations can also be counterproductive. Avoiding a quagmire of quotes or a slough of stories will keep the preacher on track. Limit yourselves to a few solid stepping-stones in a sermon. Keep the goal in mind constantly, 'How do I communicate this message accurately? Does the strategy of using this quote or that story work to the goal of communication of the Scripture?' Quotes and illustrations should not be add-ons with no purpose. They should work to reveal the central proposition.

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<sup>103</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (New York: Bantam Books, 1999), 400. The final line of the book.



## ***The Ins and Outs of Preaching***

Introductions and conclusions are what people will often remember most about a preacher's sermon. The introduction will determine whether or not they will bother granting entrance to the idea of the sermon into their lives, and the conclusion will often be what they will remember most about their guest. Both are valuable tools of communication. The introduction prefaces what the sermon will be about; the conclusion summarizes what the sermon was about. Can a sermon do without formal introductions? All sermons must begin and end somehow; the only question is how to go about it. Setting up the body of the sermon with introductory remarks and bringing together the content of the body into some concluding remarks is a helpful tool of communication. Why rid yourself of an effective and long-tested tool, a helpful piece of equipment? Both are often filled with the preacher's most engaging and meaningful words.

Perhaps the place of greatest homiletic abuse is the introduction. The mindset of 'whatever gets people's attention' is sometimes mistakenly seen as the end all of introductive evaluation. The introduction then becomes a manipulative tool to get people to listen. If the preacher does this too often, it will be seen for what it is, not a serious call to hear the Word of YHWH, but a sly trick to get you to give your attention to a person rather than a passage. When preachers begin every sermon with a list of jokes, a cute story, or a funny email, having little to nothing to do with the preacher's sermon, after time the listeners may catch on and the preacher will lose credibility as a serious herald.

This is not to say that a preacher should not begin the sermon with a powerful and engaging illustration or that his introduction needs to be bland and unappealing. The introduction should fit the purpose of the message. It should demand people's attention to the passage, not to the preacher. Usually it is best to pose the question that

the text answers, to create some form of tension that God's Word will alleviate. Let them be bold, creative, even humorous at times, but never meaningless or superfluous. The flare of the introduction should set up the message of the text, not create an obstacle for it to overcome. What is true of introductions proves also true of conclusions. What we leave people with should be some of the most engaging words we say, even as they summarize the content of the message and reinforce the central proposition.

Variations exist in how we formulate introductions and conclusions. The introduction may at times save the heart of the central idea inductively for the body of the sermon. Similarly, sometimes the conclusion should do more than restate the body, "the conclusion should not be merely a recapitulation,"<sup>104</sup> rather, Stott suggests, "It is better to keep something up our sleeve. Then we can leave to the end that persuading which, by the Holy Spirit's power, will prevail on people to take action."<sup>105</sup> Nevertheless the presence of skeletal structure (introduction, body, conclusion), hidden behind the flesh and blood of the sermon manuscript almost always works as an advantage. While thankfully some listeners will have the mental hospitality to welcome even the most sloppy sermons, a well-structured sermon more likely gains access into the lives of less hospitable hosts.

### ***"How does this Apply to me?"***

Hearing without application is like looking at a mirror, seeing what needs scrubbing, washing, and shaving, and then doing nothing about it. *Accountability* comes with the hearing of the Word; *blessing* comes with its application (Jas 1:22-25). It is a sin to merely hear the Word, but not do what it says. Jesus warned those who heard him, "Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more;

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<sup>104</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 245.

<sup>105</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 246.



whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him" (Luke 8:18). The seed sown in good soil retains it and produces a crop, or it will be barren and useless.

The preacher should work hard to bring the ideas of the text to bear on his audience through well thought out applications. Knowing his hearers, understanding their lives and situation, with what does his text call and confront them? The role of exposition goes beyond merely explaining what a text *meant*, and always forward to what a text *means*. In other words, what does the meaning of this text imply for this particular congregation? To what is God calling them? To what are they being goaded? God has something to say to His people through a passage when you preach, and what He says demands a response. What is it? If a herald of the Word does not know the answer to that question, he has not finished the sermon preparation.

The preacher should look to specifics. Here the art of communication plays a significant, yet sanctified role. A passage can have only one correct interpretation, but numerous valid applications that extend throughout diverse facets of life. The call to "love your enemies," (Matt 5:44; Luke 6:27, 35) for example, means one and only one thing, but it applies to school yard bullies, family feuds, workplace conflicts, social ostracizing, church splits, international warfare, and missionary persecution. It is the art of the expositor to bring the text to bear in specific ways to a specific people. The applications should be diverse and multiple, so as not to 'fence in' the meaning of the text. "We need to spotlight one situation and then quickly unroll to others,"<sup>106</sup> writes Chapell. Every sermon idea should have multiple specific applications, and it is the role of the herald to bring these to bear on his hearers.

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<sup>106</sup> Bryan Chappell, "Apply Within" *The Art and Craft of Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005) 292.

This is not to say that preaching becomes merely a self-help book, listing off quick ways to improve your spiritual life. In the Bible we find the story of redemption, not a to-do list of good deeds. Turning Biblical principles into specific *dos* and *don'ts* can easily lead to legalism. Grace is behind every good deed as the motive and force behind it. Paul could be as audacious as to claim he worked harder than all the apostles, and yet quickly follows it up, "yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me" (1 Cor 15:10). We must remind hearers that grace works not only as the means of our salvation but as the force behind good works. We do not move on from the gospel; the gospel moves us on.

The Text's applications must not be limited to actions. They may be cognitive, dealing with issues of worldview formation. They may be emotive, inciting us to delight, grief, joy, indignity, etc. They may call us to repent from sin or encourage us to continue in obedience. They may call us to trust in the saving work of Christ, or call us to work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12-13). They may be long-term applications, a Word from the Lord to endure specific hardships that a church must face. They may be a call to perseverance and an exhortation to hope. Applications to worship, to pray, to honor, to fear, to love, to sing, to study, to meditate, to give, to forgive, to help, to serve, to rest, to believe, to hope, are all part of the art of application.

### ***The Mannerisms of a Man***

There is a fundamental paradox about preaching as heralding. How can a man represent God? How can a human messenger stand in the place of a Divine Creator? The answer is of course, he cannot completely. No one and nothing can fully represent God. The first two commandments of the Decalogue cover this clearly. However the idea that someone can represent God should not be dismissed entirely. Christ himself, the eternal Son of God, took on flesh and in His humanity revealed God to us. He is the



Image of God *par excellence*. Human beings bear God's Image in degrees. No other creature, object, or landscape in this world can claim that. It is therefore no wonder that humanity must herald for God. No graven image will do. But it can be done. Only the living, vibrant, redeemed Image of God can stand in a place to represent his Master. How we act while doing so is extremely important.

How then should a preacher stand, move, even dress in a pulpit? The answer: as naturally as possible. Chapell writes, "The real challenge of pulpit excellence is not to add something to our delivery that is atypical of us, but to reclaim the naturalness that is most true to us."<sup>107</sup> The challenge of preaching is to overcome how unnatural we become while we preach. If someone who is normally a relaxed individual deepens his voice for effect, jerks his arms in quick motions, and becomes stiff in his neck, he is not aiding his heralding, but stifling it. Likewise the stuffy pastor who tries to be loose in the pulpit to relate to a hipper audience has also hampered his communication. The goal should be to return to normal form. The more a preacher draws attention to abnormalities, the less focus will go on to his message. Move, speak, and dress as natural and least-distracting as possible. If you were talking about a subject that impassions you, your arms would probably not fall lifeless at your sides. If you were talking about something deeply grievous, your voice would probably not sound like someone reading an academic journal. The more ill-at-ease the preacher, the more people feel uncomfortable for him. The more natural he becomes, the more people feel at ease to hear his message.

If you preach to the same congregation over a length of time, this will be all the more important. If people see a *preaching* you separate from a *real* you, they will see this as at best silly and at worst hypocritical. The herald does not cease to be human when heralding, as if he takes on a semi-celestial form, but rather, as they say, he

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<sup>107</sup> Bryan Chappell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 314.

should be down to earth. He is God's Image-bearer. The preacher's goal in the pulpit is not to be pretentious, but real. Be energetic, emotional, moving, making eye-contact, smiling, shouting and whispering, even laughing and crying when appropriate. This principle in presentation is simple: natural is best, let your pulpit demeanor be as *you* as possible.

The herald's affections should be appropriate to the mood of his passage. While a preacher should never manufacture his emotions, he should work hard to understand the emotional tone of the passage. Imagine a journalist who reports casualties in the Middle East with a smirk on his face, or a sports announcer who introduces her championship team in a drab monotone. The preacher who proclaims the betrayal of Christ by his own disciple with dry eyes and a blank look has surely not been gripped by the passage, and sends a mixed message to his congregation. If a preacher feels the passage while in preparation, he will more likely reveal appropriate affections as he preaches it.

### ***Applying a Concluding Illustration***

February 3, 1943. The setting was World War II in the northern Atlantic Ocean. A frigid nighttime air was about 36 degrees. 904 Men were aboard the USAT Dorchester. Among the 904 men were four Army Chaplains George Fox, Alexander Goode, John Washington, and Clark Poling. Four friends, 3 of the 4 married with children. Tragically, the USAT Dorchester was torpedoed by Kriegsmarine U-223. As the ship began to sink into the fatally cold 34 degree sea water, the four chaplains tried to calm the frightened soldiers. They desperately tried to evacuate the survivors, and aid the wounded ones. But the supply of life jackets ran out. Out of the original 904 men only 230 would survive. The four chaplains would not be among the 230 as they gave up their own life jackets to save others. The last sight of them was of them praying



for the men as they sank helpless into the cold waters to their death. Their lives in the place of four others. "Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) That is what Jesus did for us. He gave up his own life for the sake of saving us. Not just a physiological death, but a God-forsaken Hell-bearing one. Not to save us merely from the cold saltwater of the sea, but from the well-deserved judgment of God's wrath. The life jacket belonged to Him. Safety was His. And He gave it to us.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE POWER OF THE HERALD

#### *Holy Unction*

*Sine tuo numine* [Without your divine will]  
*nihil est in homine* [nothing is in man]  
*nihil est innoxium* [nothing is harmless]  
*lava quod est sordidum* [Wash that which is dirty]  
*riga quod est aridum* [Water that which is dry]  
*sana quod est saucium* [Heal that which is wounded]  
*flecte quod est rigidum* [Bend that which is hard]  
*fove quod est frigidum* [Warm that which is cold]  
*rege quod est devium* [Straighten that which is devious]

--Veni, Sancte Spiritus, *Latin Hymn*

#### ***Come, Holy Spirit***

The Holy Spirit has a specific goal in mind when it comes to preaching. Jesus told His disciples after a particularly in-depth time of teaching, "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you" (John 14:25-26). The Spirit is passionate about proclaiming Jesus. He is so insistent of this that He will *enable* the church to see it happen. He desires so strongly to magnify Christ that He comes and does it Himself, through us. Preaching is not the only way He does it, but it is certainly *a* way He is at work. He is not content with preachers who preach by their own strength and ability. He has come Himself to empower us to do it.

If it is the message that gives weightiness to a herald's words, and artistry that accentuates his communication, it is unction that gives empowerment to his witness. A preacher without unction is a like an athlete without muscle. The intention may be noble, but the power to perform is lacking. The preacher's duty does not end with faithful exposition of the text. He must also beg for the empowerment to proclaim it with the force and strength it demands. Our desire should be to begin each sermon claiming the



same anointing as Isaiah the prophet and the Lord Jesus, "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor" (Isa 61:1; Luke 4:18).

I remember talking to a fiery black preacher from Illinois who mentored me for a semester during seminary. We got into a conversation, and I mentioned how the old preachers used to pray for unction when they preached. He assured me, "Oh, we still pray for unction!" Listening to him preach, my suspicion is God answered his prayer often. But unction is something too often overlooked, if not entirely antiquated. One homiletics professor recounts his class's response when reading a quote from the Puritans about unction: "A student then raised his hand and asked this question: 'What does he mean by *unction*?' I laughed, thinking the student was making a joke. The blank looks on earnest faces dispelled my notion. That week I asked thirty-three incoming students if they knew what *unction* was. Thirty did not know."<sup>108</sup> I hope it is not more than the *term* for unction that has dropped out of preaching today.

Unction is the Holy Spirit's anointing upon a sermon that gives it power. It is His special blessing that can often, though not always, be sensed by both preacher and hearer. A certain holy hush comes upon the congregation and a deep sense of God. Cognitive clarity is revealed, emotions are heightened, and worship seems second nature. The preacher feels confidence and courage before the congregation, and yet humbled and broken before the cross. God's fingerprints can be found all over the sermon.

Unction is what makes a preacher mighty. It is not something that comes automatically with a seminary degree or with a pastoral staff position. It is a special blessing that comes with a calling from God upon a man to herald the Word of God. Christ's preaching was the ultimate example of unction. Those who heard Him preach

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<sup>108</sup> Zack Eswine, *Preaching to a Post-Everything World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 245.

recognized that His preaching had a divine spiritual authority, unlike the scribes (see Mark 1:27). His Spirit-empowered preaching gave life to the dead. John Owen, the puritan theologian preached:

What is authority in a preaching ministry? It is a consequent of unction, and not of office. The scribes had an outward call to teach in the church, but they had no unction, no anointing, that could evidence they had the Holy Ghost in his gifts and graces. Christ had no outward call, but he had an unction; he had a full unction of the Holy Ghost in his gifts and graces for the preaching of the gospel.<sup>109</sup>

Unction is God's empowering a person to preach, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit says the LORD Almighty" (Zeph 4:6).

Unction is not just a side dish for Charismatics; this is a main course for the whole of homiletics. Tony Sargent, in his biography of D. Martin Lloyd-Jones *The Sacred Anointing*, writes: "More than anything else, he wished to witness an outpouring of the Spirit which would lead the Church into revival. He wanted preachers to be powerful in their proclamation with ministries set ablaze by the Spirit's anointing....if [a preacher] did not experience the anointing of the Spirit resting on him, he would not know success."<sup>110</sup> Most who have preached often will know precisely what unction is, and how much they rely upon it. It is not something the preacher can manufacture, manipulate, or mask. It is God showing up in a powerful sense. It is a reminder that, as Spurgeon noted, "true preaching is an act of faith, and is owned by the Holy Spirit as the means of working spiritual miracles."<sup>111</sup> It is what every faithful preacher craves for in his preaching. It is what great preachers ask for. It is what preachers live for. It is God's empowering presence in the preaching of the Word.

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<sup>109</sup> John Owen, Sermon V "The Duty of a Pastor" *The Works of John Owen*, 63

<sup>110</sup> Tony Sargent, *The Sacred Anointing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 72.

<sup>111</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1954), 342.



## ***A Word from Corinthians***

Reliance on unction causes us to beware of the seduction of showmanship. A great showman does not make a good preacher. The mechanics and art of preaching should only help reveal the power of the message, "For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power" (1 Cor 4:20). The seduction of showmanship can sometimes entice us away from the power of the message. The Apostle Paul purposely avoided this, "When I came to you brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God" (1 Cor 2:1). Indeed Paul willingly admits his preaching style was stifled by fear, "I came to you in weakness and fear, and with much trembling" (1 Cor 2:3).

How then does he engage the Corinthians? How does he make sure his message is heard? It is "with a demonstration of the Spirit's power," that he chooses to rely on. The reason for this: "that your faith might not rest on man's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Cor 2:4-5). Paul knew that his preaching must rely on the power of unction rather than rhetorical polish, so that his hearers' faith would not be in his rhetoric but in his gospel. Perhaps Paul could have feigned a highfalutin style had he wanted to. That sort of pretension was common among the Greek trained speakers of his time, but, as D. A. Carson suggests, "Such oratory made Paul nervous. It affords far too many temptations to pride to be safe for anyone interested in preaching the gospel of a crucified Messiah."<sup>112</sup> His reliance on the Spirit's power was Paul's hope to produce genuine faith in his hearers. This empowerment of the Holy Spirit, otherwise known as unction, is what all true preachers of the gospel must pursue.

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<sup>112</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1993), 34.

## ***A Few Good Messengers***

There is a spiritual battle involved in preaching, and ignorance of it is deadly. The preacher who is most unaware of it is in the most danger. Peter warns, "Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour." (1 Pet 5:8). Those who do not recognize the spiritual nature of the work will be easy prey. The spiritual armor of God is not a romantic metaphor, but a spiritual necessity, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms" (Eph 6:11). There should be some fight, some aggression, some toughness in the one who wants to preach. He engages in spiritual warfare when he heralds the gospel.

The battle he fights is not with worldly weapons. He who "draws the sword will die by the sword" (Matt 26:52). Instead we fight with the armory of Scripture,

For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ. (2 Cor 10:3-5)

The preacher who preaches faithfully should be prepared for conflict from his preaching. Jesus said he came not to bring peace, but a sword of division (Matt 10:34-39; Luke 12:49-53). Faithful preaching will upset families, friendships, and finance boards. Preaching the gospel darkens the dividing line between Christian and non-Christian, the justified and the guilty, the found and the lost. The hypocrites and the lukewarm should not sit comfortable for long under the power of gospel-centered preaching. One way to know whether or not you have been faithful to Christ as His herald is to see if your sermons are upsetting anyone. If they are not, pray for unction until they do! No servant is greater than his master, and Christ stirred up a hornets' nest with His preaching. It is not that the preacher looks for a scuffle, verbally assaulting people, but rather that the



clear teaching of the scandal of the cross is such that it invites a fight. Let us be spiritually prepared for battle if we are faithful to the gospel.

Let us not forget that the Word of God is "the sword of the Spirit" (Eph 6:17), not the pawn of the preacher. The one who sees his ministry as merely a business transaction, "I provide you with inspirational messages on a week to week basis in exchange for a comfy office, substantial salary package, and four weeks vacation," with no sense of the profoundly spiritual nature of preaching, has sold his soul to professionalism, and eventually the devil will come to collect. One may build a big church and a multi-million dollar ministry without unction, but in the end his Faustian exchange will come back to haunt him.

There is a call to arms in Scripture. There is a battle to be fought! The captives to sin are numerous, and cowardly preachers will not free them. The ravages of the adversary are spread abroad, and he will not give up his territory easily. Jesus revealed "...the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it" (Matt 11:12). The kingdom is not for wimps, but for warriors. We are warriors however who are not relying on our own piddling power but on the unction of the Spirit. Apollyon will easily slay the naked pilgrim. "Ministers are set by God to pull down the strongholds of Satan" preached Jonathan Edwards at his installation as pastor in Northampton, "But if they are without any other help but their own strength, alas, they are miserable, weak things to go against the prince of the power of the air and to engage the god of the world."<sup>113</sup> The prince of darkness is grim, but the preacher girded with the Holy Spirit "need tremble not for him." The preacher can take confidence that "the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). A doomed ancient foe is no match for the herald of a victorious Christ. One little Word shall fell him.

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<sup>113</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Ministers Need the Power of God" *The Salvation of Souls* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2002), 47.

Something spiritually magnificent occurs in the ministry of the church, and especially in the preaching of the Word: God is making His glory known to an unseen audience, "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph 3:10-11). God is doing more in preaching than can be beheld by the eyes, and the power to accomplish this work lies with Him rather than us. If the preacher wishes to have any eternal impact in his preaching he must preach relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to achieve it.

### ***Unction and the Study***

Studying is the preacher's time to meditate on God's Law day and night (Psa 1:2), to "set your minds on things above" (Col 3:2) and to "let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly" (Col 3:16). The preacher saturates himself with the Scriptures all week, soaking up all he can from the passage, and trusts the Spirit to wring it out of him on Sunday morning. Unction is often the unleashing of the Word captured throughout the week by sound exegesis and faithful exposition. If a preacher has heard the hound of heaven in his private study, he will more often be let loose on his people in the pulpit.

In situations when an impromptu message must be given certainly the Spirit can work with a less than well-prepared sermon. He often gives special grace, but it seems He far more often works as the overflow of hours spent alone with God and His Word than as a safety net for busy ministers. Yes, it is true that Jesus told his disciples not to worry about what to say when they are arrested by angry authorities, but to trust that the Spirit of the Father will speak through them, and if a preacher finds himself in that



situation let him trust it will be true (see Matt 10:17-19).<sup>114</sup> However that is not the typical situation of the preacher. The typical situation of the preacher is one in which you must, "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim 2:15).

The cry for unction is not in opposition to rigorous study, but to self-reliance. The message we proclaim is a message of wisdom, destined for glory, revealed by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:6-10). The care the preacher should take in communicating it is without limits, and unction should not be confused with a lackadaisical attitude towards preparation. As Carson comments:

Lazy preachers have no right to appeal to 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 to justify indolence in the study and careless delivery in the pulpit. These verses do not prohibit diligent preparation, passion, clear articulation, and persuasive presentation. Rather, they warn against any method that leads people to say, "What a marvelous preacher!" rather than, "What a marvelous Savior!"<sup>115</sup>

The too common spiritual cover-up of a preacher confessing to have slacked off in his study in order to be subject to the Spirit not only leaves a bad taste in a hearer's mouth, but a squeaky sermon in her ears. The empowerment of the Spirit should not be used as an excuse for lack of self-discipline. Unction is not to be divorced from faithful preparation and study of the text. The two are faithfully wedded, as Lloyd-Jones describes this union, "The Spirit generally uses a man's best preparation. It is not the Spirit or preparation; it is preparation plus the unction and the anointing and that which the Holy Spirit can supply."<sup>116</sup> While preaching on 2 Timothy 4 and Paul's command to "bring the scrolls," Spurgeon mocked the undue adulation of under-prepared and pretension preachers:

A man who comes up into the pulpit, professes to take his text on the spot, and talks any quantity of nonsense, is the idol of many. If he will speak without

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<sup>114</sup> Robert Mounce comments, "Unfortunately, this verse has provided too many preachers an excuse for not adequately preparing the Sunday Sermon." *Matthew* NIBC (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1991), 94.

<sup>115</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry*, 35.

<sup>116</sup> *The Christian Soldier*, 135 quoted by Tony Sargent, *The Sacred Anointing*, 61.

premeditation, or pretend to do so, and never produce what they call a dish of dead men's brains—oh! that is the preacher. How rebuked are they by the apostle! He is inspired, and yet he wants books! He has been preaching at least for thirty years, and yet he wants books! He had seen the Lord, and yet he wants books! He had had a wider experience than most men, and yet he wants books! He had been caught up into the third heaven, and had heard things which it was unlawful for a man to utter, yet he wants books! He had written the major part of the New Testament, and yet he wants books! The apostle says to Timothy and so he says to every preacher, "Give thyself unto reading." The man who never reads will never be read; he who never quotes will never be quoted. He who will not use the thoughts of other men's brains, proves that he has no brains of his own.<sup>117</sup>

Careful study and holy unction walk hand-in-hand into the pulpit.

### ***Unction and the Closet***

Studying is not enough. Not only must unction never be divorced from faithful study, neither can unction ever be annulled from personal holiness. J. C. Ryle defined holiness: "Holiness is the habit of being of one mind with God, according as we find His mind described in Scripture. It is the habit of agreeing in God's judgment—hating what He hates—loving what He loves—and measuring everything in this world by the standard of His Word. He who most entirely agrees with God, he is the most holy man."<sup>118</sup> Holiness is knowing and agreeing with the mind of God. The most effective herald is one that knows the mind of his master. "My people's greatest need from me is my personal holiness," Robert Murray McCheyne informed us. Though holiness of life does not guarantee divine unction in preaching, to unweave the connection would be sacrilegious. E. M. Bounds reminded us:

Preaching is not the performance of an hour. It is the outflow of a life. It takes twenty years to make a sermon, because it takes twenty years to make the man. The true sermon is a thing of life. The sermon grows because the man grows. The sermon is forceful because the man is forceful. The sermon is holy because

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<sup>117</sup> Spurgeon Sermon no. 542, delivered on Sunday Morning, November 29th, 1863 "Paul—His Cloak and His Books" on 2 Tim 4:13.

<sup>118</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002).



the man is holy. The sermon is full of the divine unction because the man is full of the divine unction.<sup>119</sup>

Common men make common sermons. Holy men make holy sermons.

In most cases, one should not even think about preaching unless he has spent some time on his knees before God. As Martin Luther said, "*Bene orasse est bene studuisse* [To pray well is to study well]."<sup>120</sup> Lest we think we are too busy for extensive prayer preparation, let us remember that Luther himself, whose schedule would outweigh those of any three pastors today, would spend hours in prayer alone with his God every morning. Prayer is ultimately saying "I cannot do this on my own. No matter how much training, no matter how much preparation, no matter how gifted I may be, I need God." It is the antidote to self-reliance and the prescription for hope in God. Prayer reminds us that we are not professionals.<sup>121</sup> We are sinners. We are saints. We are clerics. Consider the words of William Wilberforce, who himself was not a preacher but a politician:

This perpetual hurry of business and company ruins me in soul if not in body. More solitude and earlier hours! I suspect I have been allotting habitually too little time to religious exercises, as private devotion and religious meditation, Scripture-reading, etc. Hence I am lean and cold and hard. I had better allot two hours or an hour and a half daily. I have been keeping too late hours, and hence have had but a hurried half hour in a morning to myself. Surely the experience of all good men confirms the proposition that without a due measure of private devotions the soul will grow lean. But all may be done through prayer—almighty prayer, I am ready to say—and why not? For that it is almighty is only through the gracious ordination of the God of love and truth. O then, pray, pray, pray!<sup>122</sup>

Wilberforce's self-rebuke should be felt even more by a shepherd of the church. Let us who preach remember that the Apostles in Jerusalem appointed the seven "deacons" not merely to free up time to devote to the ministry of the Word of God, but also to prayer (see Acts 6:1-7). Though we should not be legalistic about how many hours of prayer

<sup>119</sup> E. M. Bounds, *The Preacher and Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1952).

<sup>120</sup> Henry Eyster Jacobs, *Martin Luther: The Hero of the Reformation* (New York: Knickerbocker's Press, 1902), 19.

<sup>121</sup> As in the title of John Piper's book, *Brothers, We are Not Professionals* (B&H Publishing, 2002).

<sup>122</sup> William Wilberforce, quoted by E. M. Bounds, *Preacher and Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1952), 95.

should be spent per sermon, neither can we afford to be antinomian. Prayer is a must. E. M. bounds, who wrote so prolifically about prayer, attempts to turn our upside down Universe right side up, "Talking to men for God is a great thing, but talking to God for men is greater still. He will never talk well and with real success to men for God who has not learned well how to talk to God for men."<sup>123</sup> What a tragedy if many of our failures in preaching were due to, "You do not have, because you do not ask God." (Jas 4:2). Let us covet our *Sweet Hour of Prayer* before we proclaim *The Old Rugged Cross*.

The wise preacher will not only spend hours pleading with God, he will seek out others to do so for him as well. Since preaching is not a solo event, there is both a speaker and hearers, prayerful preparation for it should not be exclusive. We are wise to recruit people to pray for us, even to beg and plead if necessary! Let them know that we need God's Spirit as preachers. Many I believe are eager to pray for their preachers. After all, it is they who are getting the fruit of his labor. They are the ones who listen to him again and again, and it does them no good to have a sermon with no power. If we do not encourage people to pray for us, we may be robbing them of a privilege and responsibility that belongs not to us, but to them. God calls people to pray for the needs of their congregation, which certainly includes the hearing of the word of Christ by a Spirit-empowered preacher. Christians need faith, and "faith comes from hearing" (Rom 10:17). We should humbly submit to the blessing of being prayed for by making sure people know we need it. I can think of no good reason not to ask people to pray for their preacher, and dozens of good reasons why a preacher should ask. Unction can come from the pew as well as the closet.

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<sup>123</sup> E. M. Bounds, *The Preacher and Prayer* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1952).



### ***Unction and the Pulpit***

It is said Charles Haddon Spurgeon repeated to himself as he walked up the steps to his pulpit to preach, "I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost, I believe in the Holy Ghost."<sup>124</sup> The place of greatest need for unction is in the pulpit itself. The moments before preaching are perhaps the time a preacher most clearly recognizes his need of God's empowering presence.

An interesting phenomenon is well attested to in regards to preaching. Almost all preachers readily admit to it. For all the study and preparation, for all the careful digging into the text throughout the week, it seems as if God conceals certain nuggets to be found only at the moment of preaching. It is as if some aspect of the text, some application from the passage, comes to light and appears as clear as day only at the moment of preaching. It is an unrehearsed insight into the text where the preacher is lead away from the safe waters of his manuscript into uncharted territory. It may be something minor such as a simple application that he has not prepared, or an illustration that comes to mind. It may be something major, such as an additional point that rises to the surface of the text while he preaches, or a conclusion that hammers the proposition home better than what he had prepared. It will not likely happen in every sermon, but we should be open to a special unction in the pulpit, an eleventh hour alteration to the sermon.

Why does this happen? Maybe it has to do with seeing the faces of the hearers, and knowing whether something needs further explanation and clarification. Perhaps it has to do with the nerves and tension of the moment that causes the preacher to see the text from a different perspective. Or is it rather God reminding us that preaching belongs to Him? Is it the Spirit providing us a little nudge in the pulpit sensitizing us to His Presence? Is it a sharp pin for our too-easily inflated egos to remind us that what we do

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<sup>124</sup> Referred to by John R. W. Stott, *The Preacher's Portrait*, 118.

is not ultimately of man, but of God? Let our prayer before we preach chant as the classic Latin hymn, "Come, Holy Spirit."



## CHAPTER 6

### THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE HERALD

#### *Humble before His Sovereignty*

I form the light and create darkness,  
I bring prosperity and create disaster;  
I, the LORD, do all these things.

"You heavens above, rain down righteousness;  
let the clouds shower it down.  
Let the earth open wide,  
let salvation spring up,  
let righteousness grow with it;  
I, the LORD, have created it.

"Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker,  
to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground.  
Does the clay say to the potter,  
'What are you making?'  
Does your work say,  
'He has no hands'?

- Isaiah 45:7-9

#### ***Because Thou hast First Loved Me***

God is completely sovereign over the transforming effects of faithful preaching. Without God's secret electing grace, preaching would be futile. I would like to suggest that the doctrine of election is not only Biblical, but also beautiful. It is how the gospel comes to change people, saving us from our sins and transforming us to a new life. It is the basis for the effectiveness of the herald. God calls us, before we call on God. The Father chooses us, before we chose the Father. He loves us, before we love Him. Election is not used in Scripture as a weapon for discord, but as a means of humility. It should lead to seeing our sin, scorning our pride, and strengthening our faith. The doctrine of election is like a hymn whose rapturous melody has been enjoyed by saints throughout church history, even as others have scorned its music. My hope is that the sweetness of its melody will be heard once again by those drawn to its tune, and I can only ask for patience and pardon from those who simply cannot join the chorus.

### ***That Saved a Wretch Like Me***

How does understanding God's sovereignty over election shape the preaching of the herald of God? It convicts us of the horror of sin, and in doing so, strengthens us in the message of grace. Sin's reach is such that people cannot, indeed will not, turn to God on their own.<sup>125</sup> We will never seek God on our own because we love sin more than Him. Until our love for sin is dispelled by the grace of God, the gospel will never be enchanting to us. The only way we will ever choose Christ is if He becomes more tempting to us than sin. When the choice between knowing and worshipping Him looks more seducing than sinful self-gratification, faith begins. The problem is that our very nature loves sin.

That deeply convicts. Christ did not die for a people waiting and eager to accept Him. Christ died for a people who enjoy their sin more than God. Our hearts are, as Calvin claimed, "a veritable factory of idols."<sup>126</sup> I agree with J. C. Ryle that "Nothing, I am convinced, will astonish us so much, when we awake in the resurrection day, as the view we shall have of sin, and the retrospect we shall take of our own countless shortcomings and defects."<sup>127</sup> The reason our sinful nature will not recognize God as of infinitely greater worth than sin is because we cannot see Him as He truly is. Our sin blinds us; our depravity is total. Satan lied when he said, "your eyes will be opened and you will be like God" (Gen 3:5). Sin did the exact opposite. Our eyes are blinded by the god of this age. They cannot see the beauty of God. They cannot behold the mercy of God. They cannot envision the glory of the grace offered to us in the death of God's Son.

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<sup>125</sup> As John MacArthur puts it, "In our natural, fallen state we are dead in trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1), excluded from the life of God (4:18), and therefore totally unable and unwilling to seek God. Only when we are touched by the sovereign, convicting power of God do we move toward Him (John 6:44, 65). And thus it is not until God begins to pursue a soul that the soul responds by seeking Him...Whenever someone seeks God, you can be certain it is a response to the prompting of a seeking God. We would not love Him if He had not first loved us (cf. 1 John 4:19)" *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 103.

<sup>126</sup> John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book I.

<sup>127</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002).



The Kingdom of God appears an invisible kingdom to the unregenerate eyes. We cannot see it, until by the Spirit we are born again. "The wind blows wherever it pleases," (John 3:8) Jesus tells us. It is not until He breathes on us will we be able to see; then and only then will we believe. The preacher can do nothing to conjure up God. He cannot force His hand and push Him into action, as if he possesses his personal genie. The preacher stands completely at the mercy of God's sovereign election. His Spirit must open eyes first. But this is not a picture of despair, but of hope. God does open eyes! If your people do love Christ and trust Him as Savior, it is because the Spirit has blown on them. God must be at work! If God has first opened their eyes, then He has already shown them that He is greater than their sin. *He* is greater, not their desire to save themselves, nor the preacher's ability to win souls. We cannot open spiritual eyes. But if God opens the eyes of your hearer, then He is their new Master. Sin has lost them.

The initiative of our salvation lies with God, as J. I. Packer writes, "Knowing God is a matter of grace. It is a relationship in which the initiative throughout is with God—as it must be, since God is so completely above us and we have so completely forfeited all claim on His favour by our sins. We do not make friends with God; God makes friends with us, bringing us to know Him by making His love known to us."<sup>128</sup> A sinful nature will not, and even more so cannot, take the initiative towards God. We have given up our right to befriend God. We are traitors. God must take the initiative. The wonder and mystery of salvation is not why some choose God and others do not, but rather, why God saves any of us. If sin's power is so great, how is it that any of us can experience God's grace? R. C. Sproul recounts, "In two decades of teaching theology, I have had countless students ask me why God doesn't save everybody. Only once did a student come to me and say, 'There is something I just can't figure out. Why did God redeem

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<sup>128</sup> J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1973), 36.

me?"<sup>129</sup> But this conundrum should be the norm rather than the exception. There should be a humble joy over the realization that our eyes have been opened for us, because God has performed a miracle. Be strengthened by the message of grace. It is evidence that a miracle is happening!

### ***And Pour Contempt on All My Pride***

A closely related implication of preaching God's sovereignty over election is it destroys human pride. It destroys the pride of the hearer, as he or she cannot will himself or herself to faith. God's sovereignty over election provides the fatal blow against human pride. There is nothing we can do to save ourselves. Not even freely will it. Not even turn to God to accept Him of our own volition. Even that God must grant us by His grace. As the great evangelist George Whitefield said, "I know Christ is all in all. Man is nothing: he hath a free will to go to hell, but none to go to heaven, till God worketh in him to will and to do his good pleasure."<sup>130</sup> To be left to our own unaided free will is to be certain of our own damnation. To be given over to our own sinful nature is divine abandonment (see Rom 1:18-32). The writer of the great hymn *Rock of Ages*, Augustus Toplady affirms: "A man's free-will cannot cure him even of the tooth-ach, or of a sore finger; and yet he madly thinks it is in its power to cure his soul. The greatest judgment which God Himself can in this present life inflict upon a man, is to leave him in the hand of his own boasted free-will."<sup>131</sup> To leave sinners to their own free will would not be a gift, but a curse, for we would never choose God of our own free choice. We are forever slaves to sin in our flesh until the Son sets us free (John 8:34-36; see also Rom 6; Gal 4:1-7).

<sup>129</sup> R. C. Sproul, *Holiness of God*, 123

<sup>130</sup> Quoted in Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth Century*, Vol. 1 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1970), 407.

<sup>131</sup> *The Works of Augustus M. Toplady*, Vol. 4 (London: Paternoster Row, 1825), 283.



We could not even contribute a decision. Our faith is the product of God's initiative of grace (Eph 2:8). This initiative stems not only before our faith, but also before our existence, "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight" (Eph 1:4; see 2 Tim 1:9). Spurgeon's own testimony is humorous and enlightening:

I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me I should never have chosen Him; and I am sure He chose me before I was born, or else He never would have chosen me afterwards; and He must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why He should have looked upon me with special love. So I am forced to accept that doctrine.<sup>132</sup>

Pride is banished, and awe and gratitude return.

God's glory will not rest content under the foot of human pride. The end for which God ordains election is for His glory. God is glorified in whom He elects and in whom He does not. Consider the mind-blowing words of the apostle Paul concerning God's election as he discusses the gospel being heralded forth to the Gentiles:

Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use? What if God, choosing to show his wrath and make his power known, bore with great patience the objects of his wrath—prepared for destruction? What if he did this to make the riches of his glory known to the objects of his mercy, whom he prepared in advance for glory—even us, whom he also called, not only from the Jews but also from the Gentiles? (Rom 9:21-24)

God, as the potter, shapes even faith for His glory. It is *all* of God, and *none* of us. For the preacher to be careful to keep this in mind as he presents the gospel will be one step in creating a culture of humility and dispelling a culture of pride. As C. J. Mahaney writes, "Our calling upon Him was preceded and made possible by His calling us! That's humbling."<sup>133</sup>

Yet if this is true, not only should God's sovereignty over election humble the hearer, but it also destroys the pride of the preacher, as he is left incompetent to do any

<sup>132</sup> Charles Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students*, 227.

<sup>133</sup> C. J. Mahaney, *Humility: True Greatness* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2005), 91.

real transformation without God working. In many ways the preacher tries to do the impossible. The preacher has "thirty minutes to raise the dead."<sup>134</sup> He tries to turn people away from what they are by nature. The effect of preaching, without divine grace, is futile. It is like trying to get a cat to become a dog. Again, this is where the great poison of legalism lies. Legalism preaches, "Bark like a dog. Wag your tail like a dog. Chase cars and catch Frisbees like a dog. If you do so, you will be a dog." The problem is a cat that barks, wags its tail, chases cars and catches Frisbees, is still a cat. Proclaiming Law without gospel is trying to transform a sinful nature by telling it to act better. In the end you and your hearers will both be utterly frustrated. Jonathan Edwards preached:

Surely physicians are, of themselves, none of them able to raise the dead. You may apply what medicines you please to a dead man, you cannot fetch him to life. You may set what food you will before him, it will not nourish him. You may represent what objects you will, he will not see. If you charm in his ears ever so wisely, he will not hear. You can do no good at all to a dead man. Nothing that you do will have influence upon him. So nothing that ministers can do, if God does nothing, can have any influence at all upon the souls of sinners, their conversion or spiritual good.<sup>135</sup>

Only God can create a new nature. The role of a preacher is impotent in converting a soul. "The highest angel in heaven cannot convert one soul, if God does not set in."<sup>136</sup> What the herald can do is proclaim the glory of Christ through the exposition of the Word in hope that God creates spiritual eyes to see and savor it.

### ***That Word Above all Earthly Powers***

The opposite of pride is humility, not diffidence.<sup>137</sup> God's sovereignty over election should be a source of immense confidence for a preacher. God's saving grace

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<sup>134</sup> Attributed to Ruskin, quoted from Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Sermons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1989), 10.

<sup>135</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Ministers Need the Power of God" *The Salvation of Souls*, 47.

<sup>136</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "Ministers Need the Power of God" *The Salvation of Souls*, 47.

<sup>137</sup> One can be humble and confident, just as one can be proud and diffident. The confusion over pride and confidence is evident in a *New York Times* evaluation of the Calvinist resurgence (focusing predominantly



does not fail...ever! He will save whom He wills to save. All those who are "appointed to eternal life" (Acts 13:48) will believe. Think of the confidence available to a preacher. We can take confidence that God the Father will draw those who are His to His Son (John 6:44). His sheep will hear His voice (John 10). We should be encouraged, even as the Lord encouraged Paul among the pagans, "Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent...I have many people in this city" (Acts 18:9-10). When you enter the pulpit to herald the gospel, God secretly opens eyes to see the Savior. He covertly draws His people to himself. You show them Christ and He will give them eyes to see Him. As John MacArthur articulates:

We who witness for Christ are not ultimately responsible for how people respond to the gospel. We are only responsible to preach it clearly and accurately, speaking the truth in love. Some will turn away, but it is God who either reveals the truth or keeps it hidden, according to what is well-pleasing in His sight. His plan cannot be stymied.<sup>138</sup>

He is drawing new saints to old truths and old saints to new depths by the incognito work of the Spirit.

What if this were not the case? Imagine the crippling agony of reasoning while entering a pulpit, "This is ultimately up to me. If I preach persuasively and dynamically enough, I will enable the will of my hearers to believe in Christ and receive eternity. However if I fail, if I stutter too much and perhaps slip into a monotone right at the moment that would have had their attention for the gospel, I've lost them forever." That would be a responsibility that no preacher could endure. No back could carry that heavy load. The preacher who honestly believes this will either go insane or become manic. Thank God it is not ultimately up to us. As Chapell reminds us, "The human efforts of

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on the ministry of Mark Driscoll), which ended with the statement, "Driscoll's New Calvinism underscores a curious fact: the doctrine of total human depravity has always had a funny way of emboldening, rather than humbling, its adherents" (Molly Worthen, "Who Would Jesus Smack Down?" Jan 6, 2009 NYT). What is curious is not that 'Calvinism' leads to boldness, that type of confident ministry is to be expected considering the foundation of unconditional election. The tragedy that should be noted as *non sequitur* is human depravity leading to pride and arrogance, a confession which church history must sadly admit to.

<sup>138</sup> John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, 117.

the greatest preachers are still too weak and sin-tainted to be responsible for others' eternal destinies."<sup>139</sup> Rest preachers; our hearers' eternal life does not depend on us. If we think it does, we have entirely too high opinions of ourselves. We are simply not that important.

Without a doubt preachers are important, just not that important. God uses means. He uses fallen, limited human beings to herald His gospel. We as preachers have a serious responsibility to proclaim the good news of Christ's life and death and resurrection. God uses the preacher for a purpose. Just as when the preacher's hypocrisy turns a person away from the message of Christ, he is still responsible, so also when we demonstrate the power of the gospel in the transformation of our own words and lives, we play a part in the means God uses to draw others to Himself. We exist, and we cannot take ourselves out of the story of redemption. But the salvation of souls does not ultimately depend on the persuasiveness of our preaching. Take immense confidence that God will use you for His purpose, but never vice versa; you do not use God to save people. The oft-quoted words of Luther sum up his confidence in the Sovereign work of God: "I simply taught, preached, and wrote God's Word; otherwise I did nothing. And while I slept [cf. Mark 4:26–29], or drank Wittenberg beer with my friends Philips and Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that no prince or emperor ever inflicted such losses upon it. I did nothing; the Word did everything."<sup>140</sup> The infinite burden of responsibility for people's eternal destiny is lifted from the shoulders of a herald of God. This is not to say we should not carry a burden for our congregations. We should. But the burden is a desire to see God work mightily in the hearts of the hearers. We have a burden of prayer. There is a burden of greater trust

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<sup>139</sup> Bryan Chapell, *Christ-Centered Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 18.

<sup>140</sup> Martin Luther, Sermon from March 10, 1522; LW 51:77.



and enduring faithfulness.<sup>141</sup> It is a burden of hope. No burden of responsibility rests on us to create faith in others.

Take confidence in God's work. Be courageous. Be mindful of the fact that He will accomplish His purposes through you. They will never be ambushed. He stands as a bulwark never failing. His providential will pushes on like a locomotive steaming downhill. It is unstoppable as a juggernaut. Ride it, marvel at it, stand in awe of it, but by God you will neither halt it nor force it to alter its direction. When we step into the pulpit, know that His gracious, omnipotent hand works mightily through us. Let you and your hearers be assured of the grace of God.

### ***Blessed Assurance, Jesus is mine!***

Preaching on assurance attempts to navigate a tricky road. First, it is tricky because you do not want people assured of their salvation who are not Christians. Too often a preacher pressures people to be sure of their salvation simply because they have made a decision at a previous moment in their life: They "walked the aisle," "hit the sawdust trail," "went down to the front," "raised their hand," "filled out a commitment card" or "responded to an altar call." No doubt God can and does use momentary decisions such as these to genuinely call people to Himself, yet in Scripture we receive grace by faith, not decision. Genuine faith, an on-going trust in Christ as redeemer and Lord, by its very nature perseveres to the end. Faith exists in us not momentarily, but ongoing. It, like hope and love, remains. If people receive grace through faith, then the only thing that can truly bring about assurance is evidence of the presence of true

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<sup>141</sup> The commissioning of Isaiah demonstrates this (Isaiah 6). Isaiah is called to preach faithfully, knowing that it will not produce genuine repentance and faith in his hearers. God's calling for Isaiah is one of faithful proclamation regardless of the results, and even when the results are prophesied, "Go tell this people: Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving. Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed" (6:9-10).

persevering faith. The safest road to hell is paved not only with good intentions, but also false assurance.

Assurance is additionally tricky for the simple reason that many mature Christians do not have it, even many preachers. Even as assurance does not necessarily indicate genuine faith, neither does genuine faith necessitate assurance. I would confess with J. C. Ryle, "I know that many have never attained assurance, at whose feet I would gladly sit both in earth and heaven."<sup>142</sup> Although pressuring or bullying people into assurance is unwise, assurance is something Christians should strive for diligently. Assurance of salvation is not a necessary component of saving faith, but it is a blessing that should be encouraged, pursued, and cherished. Christians can obtain it, and pastors should shepherd people to its green pastures.

Assurance comes through growth in grace. Be careful of assuming simply because a church member has made a profession of faith, that he or she is a genuine believer. The way to make your hope sure is by "diligence to the very end" (Heb 6:11). Peter encourages the church: "Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure" (2 Pet 1:10). Scripture calls us to continue to grow in the grace of God, and to eagerly pursue assurance through sanctification (2 Pet 3-10). The apostle Paul likewise encourages the Corinthians, "Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Cor 13:5). Rushing to assurance leads to a dangerous outcome. Jesus warns, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven" (Matt 7:21). To be sure, to the unbeliever false assurance may end up being a blinding curse, but to the Christian assurance is an eye-opening blessing.

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<sup>142</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, 219.



What does this have to do with election? Much. The pilgrimage towards assurance often goes through the wicket gate of understanding the sovereignty of God in election. It should be no surprise that the final doctrine of grace is "The Perseverance of the Saints." The doctrine of election flows downstream to the enjoyment of assurance. If we desire our hearers to gain assurance of their salvation, and we should, it will come at least partially by a clearer teaching on how they came to believe to begin with. Part of growth in grace comes by meditating carefully on how we received this grace in the first place. J. C. Ryle comments on why some struggle without assurance:

They receive the Gospel truth—that there must be something done in us, as well as something done for us, if we are true members of Christ; and so far they are right. But then, without being aware of it, perhaps, they seem to imbibe the idea that their justification is, in some degree, affected by something within themselves. They do not clearly see that Christ's work, not their own work—either in whole or in part, either directly or indirectly—is alone the ground of our acceptance with God; that justification is a thing entirely without us, for which nothing whatever is needful on our part but simple faith—and that the weakest believer is as fully and completely justified as the strongest.<sup>143</sup>

If people believe their salvation ultimately depends on them, the fear of the sufficiency of their own actions will eventually corrode. Even if they believe they only contributed a decision, the tension of doubt will quickly find this weak link in the chain of assurance, 'Could it be that my decision was not genuine? Was I sincere enough? Have I lost it?' The question will plague them to the day they die. If instead, we believe that our election is according to God's sovereign will, manifested through our persevering faith (Heb 11), not only since our birth but also "before the creation of the world" (Eph 1:4), that we are "chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Pet 1:2) and that this choice is God's right, "He has mercy on whom he has mercy" (Rom 9:18), that it is truly

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<sup>143</sup> J. C. Ryle, *Holiness*, 219. Ryle's note on this paragraph quoting the Westminster Confession of Faith is additionally helpful, "The Westminster Confession of Faith gives an admirable account of justification: 'Those whom God effectually calleth, He also freely justifieth—not by infusing righteousness into them, but by pardoning their sins, and by accounting and accepting their persons as righteous; not for anything wrought in them or done by them, but for Christ's sake alone; not by imputing faith itself, the act of believing, or any other evangelical obedience, to them, as their righteousness; but by imputing the obedience and righteousness of Christ unto them, they receiving and resting on Him and His righteousness by faith.'"

“by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not of yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8) then our faith is not based on our works or volition but on God’s grace. The greater we grasp that our election comes by His will, His initiative, His work, and His preservation, the stronger will assurance follow. The gift of assurance is a gift most hearers will treasure up to, and especially on, their dying day.

### ***How Firm a Foundation***

Preaching expositionally means preachers will find passages that seem to go against the ‘system’ of divine sovereignty in election. What then should a preacher do? The answer should be obvious: Preach the passage faithfully. Your responsibility is to the exposition of the text, not to a theological system. Charles Simeon offers his example as a wise model, “When I come to a text which speaks of election, I delight myself in the doctrine of election. When the apostles exhort me to repentance and obedience, and indicate my freedom of choice and action, I give myself up to that side of the question.”<sup>144</sup> If people sense a tension in what you present, it will be eased when other pieces of the puzzle are filled in over time and they see a unified portrait. Preaching paradox does not make you a divided preacher, it makes you a herald with an undivided devotion to the sufficiency of Scripture. If a system is faithful to Scripture it will stand up to faithful exposition, especially if one is preaching to a congregation over a lengthy period of time.

Our highest allegiance must be to the authority of Scripture. I wish this could go without saying, but it often cannot. Some of the worst twisting of Scripture comes about by trying to fit passages into an otherwise sound theological system. A blatant example of this is the attempt to redefine words to force-fit them. This has lead to silly exegesis,

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<sup>144</sup> *Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. Charles Simeon*, ed. William Carus (Hatchard, 1848), 674f. quoted by John Stott, *Romans*, 278.



such as redefining terms such as “world” to mean “world of the elect.” Consider the correction of D. A. Carson, a Johannine scholar, “I know that some try to take κόσμος (‘world’) here to refer to the elect. But that really will not do. All the evidence of the usage of the word in John’s Gospel is against the suggestion.”<sup>145</sup> One can have a robust view of God’s sovereignty over election, and still maintain an extensive view of the love of God for the fallen world.

The point here is not to preach predestination, but to preach the Scriptures. When predestination comes up, preach it. When election comes up, preach it. When human responsibility comes up, preach it. When the call for human response comes up, preach it. I think what we will find is that many systems have been tested over time and do for the most part fit together. However, let the Scriptures reveal this unity on their own. If you fail to do so, your hearers will eventually sense that you are not giving the text a fair hearing and it will damage your trustworthiness as an expositor and herald of the Word.

Why take an issue as historically divisive and as commonly misunderstood as election and include it in a book on the nature of preaching as a herald? Why not leave it for the theologians and the philosophers to battle over and let the preachers just preach the Word? By including it, am I not souring the pot for many who would otherwise benefit from a book of this flavor? Please understand my intent in this chapter is not to stir up controversy, and causing needless division is the furthest desire from my mind. The intent is to come to grips with how a preacher becomes effective in preaching. Truth has practical consequences. How we understand God’s sovereignty in preaching will have consequences on how we go about preaching. The issue is

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<sup>145</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 17. See also Carson’s commentary in *The Gospel According to John* in *The Pillar New Testament Commentary*, where he argues “God’s love is to be admired not because the world is so big and includes so many people, but because the world is so bad: that is the customary connotation of *kosmos* (‘world’; cf. notes on 1:9)” (205).

important, and to deny this is to misunderstand it. Luther and Erasmus, Calvin and the Catholics, Whitefield and Wesley, knew this. They got heated about it. To dismiss the issue as inconsequential for preaching fails to understand either side, and does an injustice to both. Will we ever preach with fullness until we are humbled before a Sovereign, unconditionally electing, God? Will preaching ever be what it could be until our sermons saturated with God's sovereignty? Heralding must be weighted by a clear understanding of how the message comes to bear on those who hear it.

This is not to encourage all preachers to do a mini-series on the five points of Calvinism. That will almost always be a bad decision, as it will not reveal clearly the way election is used in Scripture. Election is not a theological playing card that a preacher should show off to impress (or offend). To treat election this way will only cause division and create a pigeonholed misunderstanding of God's Sovereignty. Rather, God's sovereignty should be the fertile ground out of which all our exposition grows. Sow the Word faithfully, and the rich soil of God's sovereignty will become evident. Sometimes it will show itself more clearly. For example, how can we preach on suffering and sanctification without preaching about God's providential purpose for it? At other times it will be more subtle, but not absent, such as when preaching on evangelism and mission. The doctrine of election is one of those subjects where the richness of the soil of God's sovereignty becomes evident.

### ***Marvelous, Infinite, Matchless Grace***

What a marvelous thing it is to be a herald of the gospel. Our whole vocation depends entirely on God. The response of faith and obedience the preacher seeks is out of his own hands. He can only exposit the Word to reveal Christ as He truly is, beautiful and perfect. After then he can pray that God would give eyes to see.



This is not to say that nothing a preacher does will affect his hearers in temporary ways. Gut-wrenching stories will cause people to cry, humorous jokes will stir people to laugh, and logically crafted arguments will encourage people to think. But they are impotent to create genuine faith and true obedience by themselves. They may end up working as *means* that God uses to reveal Himself, but they will never become *sources* of radical transformation. The situation of the sinner is too dire for us to resolve by witty preaching. As sinners in the hands of an angry God, people “hang by a slender thread, with the flames of divine wrath flashing about it, and ready every moment to singe it, and burn it asunder,”<sup>146</sup> Only Christ can save us. Emotional manipulation from the pulpit will always be a mistake. It will only confuse the issue of genuine ‘Religious Affections’ with typical emotional responses. Preaching with effectiveness must rely on a ‘Divine and Supernatural Light’. It necessitates a miracle occurring. It hopes for God to show up. It longs for a Great Awakening. It always has, and always will.

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<sup>146</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “Sinners in the Hands of An Angry God”.

## CHAPTER 7

### THE LIFE OF THE HERALD

#### Always In His Presence

I am not what I ought to be; I am not what I want to be; I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am.

- John Newton

#### ***A Gospel both True and Beautiful***

Yes, a preacher is merely a herald. And being so, the herald's integrity cannot and does not change the validity of his message. If we read, "There are 538 electoral votes cast to elect the president and vice-president" in *The National Review* or if we read it in the *New York Times*, it is no more or less true. If Billy Graham told us 5,280 feet make up a mile, it is no truer than if Bertrand Russell relayed the info. Truth is truth, and God's truth is God's truth regardless of who says it. Jesus himself recognized that out of the hypocritical mouths of the Pharisees, truth was spoken, "The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach" (Matt 23:1-2). The gospel's truth stands valid whether or not the herald's motives or lifestyle prove consonant with it. The apostle Paul echoed this sentiment in his ability to rejoice even in those who preached to stir up trouble for him, "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice" (Php 1:18). The Truth of the gospel of Christ is not at all dependent on the messenger. Preachers should remember that God's speaks just as truly through a pagan like Balaam, or even his donkey (see Num 22-24), as through a loving pastor.

Truth is true no matter who says it. The gospel rings true when the Apostle Paul preached it, and it remains true out of the mouth of a crooked televangelist. Many



faithful Christians have come to faith in Christ as the result of preachers who have since fallen into sin, or whose sins finally came to light. This should give no surprise; the gospel saves, not the messenger's character.

So why does it make a difference how the herald lives? It is important because people have eyes as well as ears, because people's first clue to the goodness of the message is its transformation of the messenger. Sometimes the preacher's life proclaims a message in contradiction to his words, and people will often not bother to sort out the confusion. The message a preacher proclaims must be one he loves and lives. The medium must match the message.

The apostle Paul rebuked a demonically inspired slave girl for declaring, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who are telling you the way to be saved," concerning him and his fellow missionaries. He objected not because the statement was false, but because the source was evil (see Acts 16:16-18). Jesus continually silenced the unclean spirits when they declared His Lordship, not because He was not Divine, but because both the timing and the messengers were misleading. The life of the messenger matters when it comes to heralding. A preacher of God who lives a godless lifestyle is diabolically misleading. The herald's life should resound with the news he proclaims. The herald is not merely a billboard. And even then, a billboard cannot proclaim everything faithfully. Think of a billboard caked in mud advertising "Bleach cleaning products." All too often the dirt of the preacher's life muddies the cleansing power of the gospel.

The lifestyle of the preacher does not make the gospel true, but it does reveal its goodness. It does not *make* the gospel good, it already is. Godliness uncovers the goodness intrinsic in the gospel. It is not only truth that matters, as the Apostle Paul exhorts us, "Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or

praiseworthy—think about such things” (Phil 4:8). The goal of a preacher’s lifestyle is to live in such a way that his life speaks for the loveliness of his message.

Ugly things can be said in beautiful ways. Think of the phrases: “He had an affair,” “a woman’s right to chose,” and “ethnic cleansing.” Each of them sounds pleasant, if not beautiful. Yet each represents an ugly and immoral reality.<sup>147</sup> Just as ugly things can be portrayed in beautiful ways, beautiful things can be portrayed in ugly ways. When the life of the herald of God is wicked, he portrays something beautiful in an evil way. The gospel is not only true, but good and beautiful. It is the work of God in saving sinners. The herald’s life should speak volumes about its beauty. Preachers should live “so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior” (Titus 2:10).

### ***More than a Messenger***

Being a herald does not reduce men to preaching machines. The weight of preaching is not something that crushes all other areas of life. Quite the opposite. Faithful preaching demands preachers attend first to those other areas of life. The preacher is more than a herald. He is a man first.

We are sheep of the Chief Shepherd who are called to an “abundant life” in Him (John 10:10). If our faith is in Christ, God delights in us not because we are heralds, but because we are sons. He loves us. He adores us. He treasures us. Even if you never preach another sermon in your life, God loves you in Christ. We have lives outside of the pulpit. We serve and worship God when we fly fish, play basketball, jog, attend PTA meetings, take vacations, drink coffee, enjoy football, listen to music, shop for clothes,

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<sup>147</sup> As to the first, “he had an affair,” words such as adultery, lechery, or fornication are ugly words to describe the same ugly reality. A woman’s right to choose is a round about way of advocating for abortion rights. Ethnic cleansing is mass murder that is ethnically motivated.



watch a good flick, walk a golf course, open birthday gifts, mow the lawn, read novels, and take Sunday afternoon naps. The *shalom* of life is not confined to the sermon.

Many preachers are husbands and fathers. Marriage takes commitment, time, and effort that may on a practical level limit the devotion to preaching, as the Scripture says, "But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world—how he can please his wife—and his interests are divided" (1 Cor 7:33-34). Luther revealed, "Before I was married the bed was not made for a whole year and became foul with sweat. But I worked so hard and was so weary I tumbled in without noticing it."<sup>148</sup> Most wives would find this less than congenial! For Luther, marriage to Catherine von Bora, his "rib," meant change, "There is a lot to get used to in the first year of marriage, one wakes up in the morning and finds a pair of pigtales on the pillow which were not there before."<sup>149</sup> Yet this commitment does not compromise the work of preaching, it complements it. The love and care of our wives and children grant us an unparalleled source of grace, sanctification, and joy that is not rivaled by the calling to preach. Marriage is a gift from God. Devotion to it is also a necessity, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of the church?" (1 Tim 3:5).

Expectations should be put aright from the outset. The preacher who has no time to spend with family, reflect on life, read and write outside of the pulpit responsibility will struggle immensely as a preacher. Search committees and leadership boards should understand the intimate connection between a preacher's responsibility to take care of his family and his ability to care for a church. David Gordon contends:

... the committee realizes that the minister is expected to work about seventy-five hours a week, and also to be a good example of a family man! Churches cannot continue to exact such a toll from their ministers while expecting them to preach well, because preaching well requires more than preparing sermons; it requires preparing oneself as the kind of human who has the sensibilities prerequisite to preaching. An individual without time to read broadly and intensely, without time

<sup>148</sup> Quoted by Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1995), 226.

<sup>149</sup> Quoted by Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand*, 226.

to reflect on life, without time to compose (even if merely in a personal journal), is not likely to be an individual who can preach.<sup>150</sup>

The preacher who abandons his family to further his preaching ministry may by God's grace still be effective, but he is sinning nevertheless. The man who knows how to wrestle with his text in the study should also know how to wrestle with his kids or grandkids on the floor. Preaching remains the priority of the church, but in order to be fit for the task the preacher must have his house in order. He is a human being before he is a homiletician, a man before a messenger, a son before a herald. Let him live all of life *Coram Deo*, before he speaks the *Verbum Dei*.

### ***The Pastor-Preacher***

The best preachers are pastors. The reason for this is anything but shocking. Pastors know and are known by the people they speak to better than anyone else. The pastor's finger is always on the pulse of the church even as his heartbeat is laid bare to his flock. He has an insider's view of the members even as he puts himself out there in full sight of the congregation. He does not sit on the sideline watching his people walk the Christian life, offering tidbits of advice and counsel, or even out in front of them leading them as a politician or CEO. He has locked arms with them and has determined to walk with them across the finish line together. Certainly not all preachers are pastors, just as not all pastors are preachers, but it must be said that the preacher who knows the strengths and weaknesses, the hates and loves, the prejudices and peccadilloes, the hurts and the history of his congregation will be able to preach to his people like no other herald. As Lloyd-Jones commented, "The trouble with some of us is that we love preaching, but we are not always careful to make sure that we love the people to whom

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<sup>150</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (Phillisburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2009), 107.



we are actually preaching.”<sup>151</sup> If a pastor truly loves his people, he will not only be given a listening ear, but an open heart. The best preacher is the pastor-preacher.

It is important to remember that the apostle Paul was a missionary rather than an armchair theologian. He endeavored to give more than just his tongue or his pen to his hearers, but his entire life, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us” (1 Thess 2:8). Athanasius and Augustine were ministers as well as mouthpieces for God. Luther and Calvin spent their lives serving congregations in Wittenberg and Geneva in and out of the pulpit. Jonathan Edwards pastored faithfully in Northampton, MA and Stockbridge, MA as well as a missionary to the Housatonic Indians. Their shepherding of the flock shaped the sharing of the Word, and the two ministries worked together. Preachers should be able to say with the apostles, “We have spoken freely to you...and opened wide our hearts to you” (2 Cor 6:11).

Seminaries will teach a preacher a great deal about pulpit ministry, but some things are left for the school of experience. Much about preaching can only be learned in the fray of pastoral ministry. When it comes to fighting sin and defending the faith, the battle-worn veteran will probably be the most competent warrior. Those who have helped others through ugly marriage struggles, counseled kids who lost their mother through leukemia, and prayed with a parent whose child has chosen a gay lifestyle, will better herald the Word because of it. In a generation that values youth and beauty above all else, let us remember “Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life” (Prov 16:31). But it is not merely age that is admirable, but a perpetual godly example. Paul commanded the young Timothy, “Don’t let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity” (1 Tim 4:12). This example, revealed by relationship, will be

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<sup>151</sup> D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 92.

one of the preacher's most important assets. The one who can say with all confidence, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (1 Cor 11:1) will be the most valuable of preachers.

As mentioned, the content of the message does not vary based on the experience of the individual. God is the speaker; the preacher is the herald. But the preacher's insight, ability to communicate, and sensitive application of the text come with deep-rooted relationships with people. The life of a preacher is forged over the anvil of pastoral ministry. It creates what Aristotle called the *ethos* of a speaker. The refining fire of pastoral care burns up any dross of preaching; he begins to discard applications and illustrations that are unhelpful to the spiritual good of his hearers and what is left is preaching that is meaningful. When a pastor-preacher steps into the pulpit, he is most competent who does so as one who knows and is known by those to whom he speaks.

### ***An Unheralded Preacher***

The preacher must strive to live at least as good as his preaching. Spurgeon recounts the man who "...preached so well and lived so badly, that when he was in the pulpit everybody said he ought never to come out again, and when he was out of it they all declared he never ought to enter it again."<sup>152</sup> Sadly this caricature has a good deal of truth to it. Preachers who are gifted in the pulpit may also be grumpy in the home.

The most deadly threat, the most fearful enemy to the ministry of the Word today is hypocritical preaching. Simply put, hypocritical preaching poisons the purity of preaching, sullyng it not only for one's own ministry but also for all those in the work of preaching. The hypocrisy of a few damaging the witness of the whole is seen in other vocations. People distrust a used car salesman, not because we believe that all car salesmen are cheats, but because we know some of them are in fact dishonest. People

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<sup>152</sup> Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *Lectures To My Students*, 17.



poke fun at lawyers, not because every lawyer is out to rob you, but because there are in fact lawyers who are worse cheats than car salesmen. Sadly, preachers are sometimes among those all too often distrusted.

Of course no one is without sin, except Christ (John 8:46; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 4:15). The very nature of the gospel reveals that the herald's lifestyle is *not* sinless. If he were to give the impression of his own personal perfection in his preaching, it would contradict the very gospel he proclaims. Some foolishly try to uphold the illusion of innocence, and eventually it becomes obvious to people that the emperor has no clothes. The issue is not whether or not the preacher is perfect, but whether he is growing in grace.<sup>153</sup> The question for preachers constantly before them is: Have you heeded your own message? Does your preaching represent an accurate portrayal of what you believe and strive to live? Is what you bring into the pulpit what you are pursuing outside the pulpit?

People can forgive a failure, but will have difficulty overlooking a liar, who brings into the pulpit a hypocritical façade. It is one thing to be a humbled sinner, it is quite another to be a competent con artist. The preacher by his sin can hurt the kingdom's witness like no other man or woman can hurt it: There are many hardened hearts toward the gospel primarily due to the perversion of a preacher. Many will not hear the message of the Master because of the hypocrisy of the herald. Preachers must keep this in mind always, and be prepared to give an account in the end. We must make sure we have heard our own message first before we bring it to others. As John Owen said:

I think truly, that no man preaches that sermon well to others, that doth not first preach it to his own heart. He who doth not feed on, and digest, and thrive by what he prepares for his people, he may give them poison as far as he knows; for, unless he finds the power of it in his own heart, he cannot have any ground of confidence, that it will have power in the hearts of others.<sup>154</sup>

<sup>153</sup> So for example, there are certain character qualifications for one called to preach, as outlined in the Pastoral Epistles. See esp. 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9. Certainly anyone who is knowingly and willingly living in unrepentant sin is disqualified. And there may be sins of the past that are so disreputable that even if repented of cause such a scandal to the integrity of the office that they prohibit faithful preaching.

<sup>154</sup> John Owen, "The Duty of a Pastor" *The Works of John Owen*, vol. IX. (London: Johnstone & Hunter, 1851), 63.

A faithful herald must be about the business of self-watch, the pursuit of personal holiness. "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do, you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim 4:16).

### ***The Venom of Spiritual Pride***

The preacher is especially prone to a particular transgression, and perhaps the most deadly sin of all: spiritual pride. Spiritual pride is an attitude where the preacher begins to think he is more important and more valuable to the Kingdom than others because of who he is. With all eyes of a congregation set on his figure and all ears opened to his tongue alone, the temptation to pride is ever lurking. The average listener would dread the thought of standing before a crowd and giving a lengthy speech, never mind a speech about knowing God, the most intimate and mysterious part of her life. But the preacher stands courageously before a crowd and speaks powerfully about the things of God, and does so week after week.

What is the preacher's response to this calling? To be humbled by the awesome responsibility entrusted to him? To cry out to God for wisdom and grace for a calling he is utterly unworthy of? To pray after his message, "What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?" (2 Sam 9:8), "Not to us O LORD, not to us, but to your name be the glory" (Ps 115:1), "We are unworthy servants, we have only done our duty" (Luke 17:10)? Sometimes this is the case, but too often not. Sometimes the herald steals credit for the message he proclaims and uses it to feed his ego. Sometimes the nectar of narcissism is too sweet for the preacher to resist. He begins to love the praise of men more than the satisfaction of faithfulness to God. Pats on the back interest him more than the smile of God. But the preacher must not let himself be consumed with egoism. He must fight for humility.



Preaching is a task given to us by grace. "Let's be honest," writes Al Mohler, "The act of preaching would smack of unmitigated arrogance and overreaching were it not for the fact that it is God Himself who has given us the task. In that light, preaching is not an act of arrogance at all but rather of humility."<sup>155</sup> All temptations of using preaching as a crutch for one's insecurity, or a stool for one's ego, must be vigorously resisted. The only way to do this is to continue to remind ourselves of our role: We are heralds of God, entrusted with a message. The voice of Jesus yet resounds in His church. All glory belongs to God. God could raise up stones to do this if He wished (see Luke 3:8). Preaching is God's work from start to finish.

But even if one can maintain a deaf ear towards the praise and admiration of the people, and listen exclusively for the approval of his Master, he faces an even greater temptation towards spiritual pride from an even deadlier source, the proximity to the Holy. The closeness to the Transcendent can create a seductive temptation to spiritual pride. This is true of all Christians, but even more so of the preacher who steepes himself in the mind of God throughout the week and begs for the Spirit's power in the point of preaching. As C. S. Lewis put it:

For the Supernatural, entering a human soul, opens to it new possibilities both of good and evil. From that point the road branches: one way to sanctity, love, humility, the other to spiritual pride, self-righteousness, persecuting zeal. And no way back to the mere humdrum virtues and vices of the unawakened soul. If the Divine call does not make us better, it will make us very much worse. Of all bad men religious bad men are the worst. Of all created beings the wickedest is one who originally stood in the immediate presence of God. There seems no way out of this.<sup>156</sup>

Being close to God is a dangerous thing. For Adam it lead to the craving to become *Actual* instead of *Image*, to "be like God, knowing good and evil" (Gen 3:5). It tempted Moses to hit the rock twice as if his own hand provided for Israel, as if he was not the

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<sup>155</sup> R. Albert Mohler, *He is Not Silent* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2008), 42.

<sup>156</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Reflections on the Psalms" *The Inspirational Writings of C. S. Lewis* (New York, NY: Inspirational Press, 1994), 147.

conduit of God's provision but the source. For Peter it urged the hell-inspired rebuke to the Lord for talking about the cross, "Never, Lord!" and this immediately after the Father in Heaven revealed through him about Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" (Matt 16:16). Jesus spoke His harshest rebuke to the religious leaders rather than to the prostitutes and tax collectors (see e.g. Matt 23; John 8:42-47). In Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, the younger brother comes home. The story ends with the older brother still outside, scolding his father (Luke 15:11-32). Spiritual pride is devilish, spawning forth from the very heart of Satan. Paul's qualifications for eldership include "not a recent convert" not simply to allow time for discipleship, but to avoid the danger that "he may become conceited and fall under the same judgment as the devil" (1 Tim 3:6). Even the younger brother can become an older brother if he is not careful.

We should take caution when coming in proximity to the Holy. The temptation to spiritual pride is knocking at the preacher's door; its desire is to overcome him, but he must overcome it. This spiritual hydra may show its ugly heads in various segments of life, such as social, financial, or sexual deviancies. Sexual temptation is a particular temptation for preachers, who are given an incredible amount of intimate access to people's lives and authority over their decisions. It is not the only temptation, but it is one that most should be especially watchful. If we are unguarded, and unintentional about purity, temptation will find us out, whether we are looking for it or not. Sexual sin brings an unparalleled ruin (1 Cor 6:18-20) to an unparalleled number of preachers, "Many are the victims she has brought down; her slain are a mighty throng" (Prov 7:26). It is the heart as well as actions that must be guarded. Desire gives birth to sin, and sin to death (Jas 1:13-15). Above else, guard your heart (Prov 4:23).

The slippery slope to spiritual death often begins with spiritual pride. When a preacher begins to think he is above the cross rather than below it, believing that the doctrine of sin is for "other people," that God's grace has been repaid through his



ministry sacrifices, it will surely ruin him. We must remember that the ground is level at the foot of the cross. Continue to preach the gospel to yourself.

"When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."<sup>157</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer's words may have been prophetic of his own controversial calling, which ended in his execution by the hand of the Nazis, but what Bonhoeffer was referring to is a death to self, to the old man; a death to the attachments of this world. The disciple of Christ must die to his own selfish pride. If this is necessary for the disciple, it is even more so for the disciple who is also a preacher.

This is an ongoing work that requires constant vigilance. D. Martin Lloyd-Jones said of himself that he would not even cross the street to hear himself preach. Never mind that he is arguably considered the greatest preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, he himself wrote, "I have a feeling that I have only really preached twice in my life, and on both occasions I was dreaming... If only I could preach like that in the pulpit when I was awake."<sup>158</sup> Preaching is humbling work. It is the Will of God to speak the Word of God to the people of God through the herald of God, and to borrow a line from Whitman, "the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse."<sup>159</sup> Perhaps it is too much to label us as "Channels Only," but the heart of the hymn is in the right place. The preacher is the conduit of the Spirit's power in ministering the Word. He acts neither as the source nor the sole destination. Humility is the necessary posture preachers must take before God. "Humility is not so much a grace or virtue along with the others," wrote Andrew Murray "it is the root of all, because it alone takes the right attitude before God, and allows Him as God to do all."<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1959), 89.

<sup>158</sup> *Knowing the Times*, 263 taken from Tony Sargent, *The Sacred Anointing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1982), 18.

<sup>159</sup> Walt Whitman, final verse of the poem *O Me! O Life!*

<sup>160</sup> Andrew Murray, *Humility: The Beauty of Holiness* (Washington, PA: CLC: 1997), 14.

The work of preaching is a risky business, not meant for the faint in heart. The stakes are raised and the temptation is heightened. The preacher must spurn spiritual pride and hug humility tightly with both arms. If he does not, the venom of self-righteousness will infect him until his soul, never mind his preaching, is paralyzed by it. We are always no more than one step away from ruin. Yet as pilgrims progressing to the Celestial city with each step we draw closer to a faithful finish!



*Part III: A Lay of the Cultural Landscape*

## CHAPTER 8

### THE WORLD OF THE HERALD

#### *The Times in Which We Speak*

The glorious city of God is my theme in this work... I have undertaken its defense against those who prefer their own gods to the Founder of this city—a city surpassingly glorious, whether we view it as it still lives by faith in this fleeting course of time, and sojourns as a stranger in the midst of the ungodly, or as it shall dwell in the fixed stability of its eternal seat, which it now with patience waits for, expecting until “righteousness shall return unto judgment,” and it obtain, by virtue of its excellence, final victory and perfect peace... and as occasion offers, we must speak also of the earthly city, which, though it be mistress of the nations, is itself ruled by its lust of rule.

-Augustine, *The City of God*

#### *Breathing the Arctic Air*

Let us be self-aware. Trying to describe the culture in which we live is like a penguin commenting on the Arctic air.<sup>161</sup> The penguin with no neutral reference point may claim, “It’s not that cold” or “It’s a little snowy in the winter.” This may help the puffin, but to the flamingo his comments remain chillingly inadequate. We preach from within the culture, not from a neutral vantage point. R. Albert Mohler, president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, admits:

Others think they can somehow evade the culture. In reality, this is impossible. We may try to remove ourselves and our children from the culture, but the culture will find us. We use language, wear clothing and engage as consumers in a world of continuous cultural invasion. The culture is a vast network of institutions, laws, customs, and language that is a constant part of our lives, like it or not.<sup>162</sup>

The point is not that we cannot evaluate the culture around us, but that we are not objective observers. This is the air we breathe, and our evaluations reflect the climate of culture. Christians do not exist in a vacuum, objectively evaluating the world. We do not stand on the shore looking at the waves of culture; we wade neck deep in them.

<sup>161</sup> I am borrowing and changing the species from Aristotle’s well-known description of a fish trying to describe the pond in which it has grown up.

<sup>162</sup> R. Albert Mohler, Jr., *Culture Shift* (Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 2008), xii.



Even penguins can recognize particularly cold Arctic winters. Cultural shifts and trends can and should be seen and evaluated by those who are in their midst. Living in the midst of a culture does not make us ignorant of change; it simply makes change personal. The role of a preacher is to understand the waves of culture, even as he attempts to wade through them with those around him.

When engaging the culture, we do not examine as scientists who place culture under a microscope. We ourselves live as specimens of it. A preacher's work is not anthropology. The anthropologist studies a foreign culture in which she tries not to interfere, attempting always to remain neutral and objective. The preacher labors like the artist trying to understand the culture in which he works so that he might communicate meaningfully and powerfully to it. He simultaneously lives as a part of the culture and works as a force in the culture.

### ***Christ and Cultures***

Understanding the culture around us presents us with a difficult work. The world in which a preacher speaks bears diversity. We cannot say the same things for those who minister in Los Angeles, CA as we can for those in Island Falls, ME; downtown Manhattan or Winsted, MN. The cultural variations diverge even more when looking at the international scene. Employing the terminology "today's culture" becomes virtually useless when one considers the differences between Bangkok and Boston or London and Luanda. When speaking of culture, we are really speaking of one culture in the midst of numerous other cultures that together form the collective thinking and customs of an era.

The culture I attempt to describe speaks more accurately of an urban or suburban setting in the United States than elsewhere. It will not prove true of everywhere. As cities become increasingly populated, it will become the setting more and more crucial in

the world for the work of preaching.<sup>163</sup> Even trying to evaluate this particular culture seems almost a lesson in futility, as the cities are not only diverse themselves, but constantly change.

### ***Post-Modernism: What Is It, Or Are They, Or Am I?***

We live in what is often referred to as a post-modern culture. Trying to define post-modernity is like herding cats, as post-modernity loves evasion. How do you define a culture that scorns definition? As David Wells writes, "In a strange way it is the postmodern ethos which is helping to obscure its own nature."<sup>164</sup> The term Postmodern has become so overused, so widely defined, so intentionally obscured, that it has become almost useless.<sup>165</sup> Yet, something tells me that as much as the post-modern mindset would smirk at this semantic pliability, wisdom compels us to continue to demand some definition of the movement.<sup>166</sup> We must listen carefully with perceptive ears to what we hear said. It is not an easy task, but it can be done. We are not post-lingual...yet.

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<sup>163</sup> David Wells notes, "Today 93 percent of Americans live in cities of 50,000 or more, and in 1999, for the very first time, the world became urbanized, meaning that more people lived in cities than in rural areas," *The Courage to Be Protestant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 32.

<sup>164</sup> David F. Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 61. Reading representatives of the movement often only worsens the matter. "When major postmodern figures speak or write, the gibberish that often results sounds more like a vocabulary test than a sustained argument," R. Albert Mohler, *He is Not Silent* (Chicago, IL: Moody, 2008), 116.

<sup>165</sup> The term postmodernism has been used from something as simple as a style of worship service, as in "our post-modern worship service." D. A. Carson comments, "Even within the evangelical community, the diversity of voices regarding the place and even the meaning of postmodernism continues to rise," *Christ & Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 88. Similarly is the term 'emergent' which means something along the lines of a post-modern friendly Christianity. However, it is as diverse in usage as is the term post-modern.

<sup>166</sup> The very term *post-modern* is itself nonsensical. If 'modern' means the latest, newest, most up-to-date, how can something be *post-modern*? If the culture of Modernity saw itself as an era that had arrived as civilization's grown-ups, an era that would last forever, is Post-modernism then the era after the never-ending era? As times change and culture moves on, it is certain post-modernism will make the same mistake as modernism and once again see itself as the eternal grown-ups of culture. Will this give rise to the post-post-moderns, or modern-post-moderns? Or perhaps we will simply find a new faddish term such as *quasi* or *ultra*. How about *uber-post-modernism*?



## ***The Ways, the Truths, and the Lives***

*The ways* – Religious pluralism, the belief that there exist many valid ways to the transcendent and numinous arises as a central component.<sup>167</sup> Modernism's lust for a monopoly on the truth and its disdain for the immaterial and mysterious led to what might be seen as an overreaction.<sup>168</sup> The term *pluralism* does not simply describe post-modernity, as in, realizing that we live in a culture of many different religions.

Undoubtedly it is not uncommon to live in a neighborhood representing as many religions as there reside families, and oftentimes multiple religions exist in the same family or even in the beliefs and practices of the same individual! Pluralism now goes further than description towards *prescription*—all religions must be seen as equally valid. Christ is more than welcome as part of the conversation, along with Buddha, Vishnu, Mohammed, Zarathushtra, and Darwin. The preacher, along with the guru, priest, and the imam, resounds as one voice among the cacophony. Pluralism means reduction, as the meaning of religion is reduced to the surface level similarities that can be found among religions. The motto is, "All religions basically teach the same thing," and therefore any religion becomes as good as another. The Golden Rule arises as the universal doctrine of the pluralistic pantheon.

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<sup>167</sup> It is of interest that the cultural use of 'numinous' may not refer to a divine being at all. Some of the 'New Atheism' leaders use the term as an existential realization or experience with no reference to the divinity and available to theists and atheists alike. The term was popularized by Rudolf Otto (1869-1937) in his work on 'The Holy'. Ironically the term comes from the Latin *numen*, for 'divinity'. C. S. Lewis in "The Problem of Pain" *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2002), chap. 1, makes the argument that the numinous is connected to the divine.

<sup>168</sup> The relationship of Modernism to Post-modernism is the subject of much debate. Some choose to use terms such as 'solid modernism' versus 'liquid modernism' that brings out the connection between the two cultures. Harold Netland, in his book *Encountering Religious Pluralism* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2001) links the two eras together in what he labels "The Culture of Modernity." I think it is fair to say that there are a number of shifts that are merely extensions of the direction set by Modernism and a number that are outright contradictions. So, Mohler, "Modernity, the dominant worldview since the Enlightenment, has been supplanted by postmodernism, which extends certain principles and symbols central to the modern age, even as it denies others." R. Albert Mohler, *He is Not Silent*, 115-116. Interestingly, D. A. Carson suggests that with a little chastening the two cultures may end up saying the same things, "A chastened modernism and a 'soft' postmodernism might actually discover that they are saying rather similar things." D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited*, 90.

The word 'religion' itself has become passé, and the term 'spirituality' has become vogue.<sup>169</sup> Spirituality reclaims the idea of the mysterious common to all religions. Uncertainty equals humility. The origin of the universe, the nature of 'God', the *eschaton*, and all things theologically complex are best left to the unknown. Consider the often undecipherable Derrida, "Our faith is not assured, because faith can never be, it must never be a certainty."<sup>170</sup> If religion is the opiate of the masses, blinding us to issues of power, control, and manipulation, then spirituality gives us our detox. To be spiritual means to be humble about religion.

*The truths* - As you might guess from this definition of pluralism, truth itself must be redefined. Instead of modernity's monolithic view of the truth (the truth out there to be discovered by the tools of reason) post-modernity understands truth as relative. No person, or society, remains unbiased. Each person has a right to her own perspective of what she conceives to be true. Yet, since all of us perceive life from a unique perspective, the existence of objective 'reality' becomes not only impossible to know, but unimportant to believe in. What matters ultimately is what appears 'true' for you.

Christianity has every right to claim truth, as does any other religion, but never over and against another. The truth lies not outside of us, but within us. Faith has become a natural good, with no reference to its object. This can be seen in the respectable and in many ways admirable *Tony Blair Faith Foundation*. Blair describes its aims:

I launched the Tony Blair Faith Foundation to promote respect, friendship and understanding between the major religious faiths; and to make the case for faith itself as relevant, and a force for good in the world. I have always believed that faith is an essential part of the modern world. As globalisation pushes us ever

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<sup>169</sup> Summed up, "We are spiritual. We want relationships, but we do not want to be religious," David Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant*, 60.

<sup>170</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995), 80. Compare his statement to that of the author of Hebrews 11:1 "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."



closer it is vital it's not used as a force for conflict and division. Faith is not something either old-fashioned or to be used for extremism.<sup>171</sup>

To be a person of faith is to be a moral person, regardless of the content of that faith.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a modernist forerunner to postmodernism, begins his devotional *The Meaning of Faith*, "Discussion about faith generally starts with faith's *reasonableness*; let us begin with faith's *inevitableness*...if faith is an unescapable(sic) necessity in every human life, then we must come to terms with it, understand it, and use it as intelligently as we can."<sup>172</sup> If faith is universal, it is undefined, unifying, and harmless.

The stickiness of truth presents a real blind-spot for relativism, especially when it comes to morality. Actor and musician Harry Dean Stanton says, "Well, it's obvious that ultimately there is no right and wrong in reality...My moral code is very, very simple: don't lie to anybody, including yourself, and don't steal. It's not a question of right and wrong, it is a matter of intelligence. You don't lie, because it's stupid; and you don't steal, because it's a stupid thing to do."<sup>173</sup> Is morality just a matter of intelligence, and, if so, what of far more heinous crimes than lying and stealing? To their credit, post-modern advocates seem particularly concerned with international human rights. We can invoke truth when it helps advance human rights, but banish it when it starts to make impositions on our autonomy. There is a drive to have it both ways: the value of human rights allows a universal truth, while the origin, meaning, and *telos* for those human rights remain relative, products of cultural conditioning.<sup>174</sup> The inherent contradiction in

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<sup>171</sup> Tony Blair Faith Foundation Website Our Aims, <http://www.tonyblairfaithfoundation.org/pages/our-aims> (accessed December 2, 2010).

<sup>172</sup> Harry Emerson Fosdick, *The Meaning of Faith* (New York: Association Press, 1917), 1.

<sup>173</sup> Zoe Sallis, ed., *Ten Etemal Questions* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2006), 88.

<sup>174</sup> Again, in the concept of social conditioning there is an inherent contradiction. If all religious beliefs are the product of cultural conditioning, then the belief that all religious beliefs are the product of social conditioning is itself a product of social conditioning. To read a more extensive objection, see for example Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 3-21.

claiming as a universal truth all truth as relative gets noted, but for the most part ignored.<sup>175</sup>

*The lives* – One of the key tenets of post-modernity is, as Jean-Francois Lyotard claimed, “[i]ncredulity toward meta-narratives,” that is, a disbelief in an all-encompassing worldview of reality. A helpful way to summarize this is the notion of *tolerance*. By an ever-so-slight shift in semantics, tolerance has come to mean more than *respect* or *peaceful co-existence*, and now refers to *affirmation* and *validation*. Relativity has reached its logical end.<sup>176</sup> The story of one individual, their experiences and perception of reality, does not contradict with another, because it is one's own story. Experiences can not be right or wrong, so everyone must remain tolerant of the stories of others.

Forming a meta-narrative indecently attempts to control other people. Your experience is unique to you just as others' experiences are theirs alone. The two may interlock but never contradict. Peace is the ultimate goal. “Live and let live” reveals more than a motto; it has become the universal precept.

The Existential Self arises as ultimate, rather than the objective Other. Ilana Goor, international sculptor and designer, sums up this mindset well. When asked the question, “What is your concept of God?” she replied,

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<sup>175</sup> Tim Keller defines this self-contradiction, “It is no more narrow to claim that one religion is right than to claim that one way to think about all religions (namely that all are equal) is right. We are all exclusive in our beliefs about religion, but in different ways” *The Reason for God* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 13.

<sup>176</sup> David Wells expresses it, “Any attempt at seeing life in terms of a worldview is dismissed as typical Enlightenment arrogance or as a failure to see that all thought is conditioned by its cultural context and must, accordingly, be acknowledged as being relative.” Wells makes a distinction between ‘worldview’ and ‘meta-narrative’: “It is actually misleading to speak of the disappearance of worldviews in the postmodern world. What have undoubtedly disappeared are the Enlightenment ‘metanarratives,’ those overarching structures of meaning, derived by unaided reason, which enabled people to interpret life as a whole and to see the connections of its parts and where it was all heading in its progress away from darkness and ignorance. These metanarratives were what enabled people to have a perspective on life within which questions of meaning were grasped, and typically this perspective rested on a belief in the existence of truth of a universal kind, unrevealed though it was. All of that has now collapsed.” The distinction is important because postmodernism is itself a ‘worldview’, but vehemently rejects the label of ‘meta-narrative’. “What has replaced the worldviews that once sought to encompass the whole of existence in their understanding are now privatized worldviews, worldviews that are valid for no one but the person whose world it is and whose view it is,” David Wells, *Above All Earthly Powers*, 74.



I'm not a great believer in God. I believe in myself because I have not seen any hand coming from anywhere helping the people who don't help themselves. Obviously there is some power, but I don't know how to describe it, I don't know anybody who has seen it. I think the most important thing is believing in what you are aiming for. So I guess this is my God, believing in the things that I am going after. I do not pray or meditate; I believe in myself.<sup>177</sup>

Your life is simply that, *your* life. Your story is *your* story. It should never be seen as trumping or negating the experience of another. That would make you intolerant.

### ***Text Critically Wounded***

Perhaps the realm where post-modern thought was first birthed, or at least first saw its maturation, was literary criticism. Texts, written words, have become the primary breeding ground of postmodern fertilization. Texts throughout history, be they political, historical, or religious texts, enforce power over others. The wealthy and the powerful decide what makes it into the annals of civilization, and do so with self-interested and ethnocentric motives. The Bible and other sacred writings act as the worst historical culprits. But texts have an inherent weakness to them: they lie indefensible.

What matters when it comes to a text is not the author, but the reader. We arrive at what Jacques Derrida claimed as, "the death of the author." The text does not contain inherent meaning sitting still on the page of an old book. Like a tree falling in the middle of the woods makes no sound with no one to hear, so a text tucked away in the shelves of a bookstore contains no meaning without someone to read it. Its only meaning comes in the meaning that the reader receives from it, or, better yet, gives to it.<sup>178</sup>

The weakness of texts is that they deconstruct themselves. If the meaning of texts lies in the interpretation of the reader, then no text in itself has meaning until it is

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<sup>177</sup> Zoe Sallis, ed., *Ten Eternal Questions* (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2006), 34.

<sup>178</sup> As David Wells explains, "It is not true, post-moderns like Derrida and Foucault assert, that the interpreter stands outside the text, or that the interpreter is ever without bias and interest in power, or that the intent of the author can be discerned or that this intent is even important, or that words have fixed, determined meanings...Texts come to mean different things in different contexts or when different questions are brought to them," *Above All Earthly Powers*, 87.

read. The interpretation, like beauty, is in the eyes of the beholder. Since any text can be read with multiple meanings, no single meaning can be authoritative. If all meanings are valid, then no meaning is ultimately valid. The text deconstructs itself. Notice we do not deconstruct texts, a common misconception. They deconstruct themselves. They do not *de-struct*, or *con-struct*, they *de-con-struct*. They unravel themselves. They are 'undone'.

The long held connection between language and reality was a myth. Instead language only expresses one person's interpretation of reality. And even that interpretation, especially of an ancient author, has become inaccessible. Kevin Vanhoozer offers a brief overview of its development:

In the premodern world, the nature of reality was fixed and revealed by God. In early modern philosophy, reality was thought to have an eternal order that was knowable by reason. In later modern philosophy, Kant suggested that what reason knows is its own workings on experience, not the world itself. In our postmodern context, the tendency is to radicalize Kant's insight and to follow Nietzsche by saying that we can never get beyond languages to an extralinguistic reality. The challenge today is to explain how language can be used to talk truly about reality.<sup>179</sup>

Contrary to what some fundamentalists might fear, a post-modern culture has no intention to discard the Bible. Many people find meaning and purpose for themselves in what they read, and because of that it proves valuable to them. The Bible, like any other text, should not be denied its place among the endless library from which a reader may choose to find meaning. The authority of the Bible is not challenged based on an either-or argument (e.g. the Bible *or* secularism), but rather by a both-and argument (e.g. the Bible *and* The Origin of Species). One may wonder at this point, does this mean that post-modernism contends for narcissism? If everything is relative, does that lead to radical individualism? Emphatically not.

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<sup>179</sup> Kevin Vanhoozer, "Introduction: Hermeneutics, Text, and Biblical Theology" *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 24.



## ***Common-unity***

For post-modernity the light at the end of the existential tunnel is community. Though texts themselves have no inherent meaning, and are therefore basically useless in terms of objective definition of reality, they come to life in the reading of the community. Texts do mean something; they mean something to those who read them. If one community reads a text and comes to certain shared conclusions about its meaning, it has meaning for them. So long as the meaning does not claim objective reality for all, we stay safe.<sup>180</sup>

A black church community has a certain reading of the Old Testament Prophets that gives definition to who they are and how they face social oppression. Simultaneously a Chinese congregation begins to read the words of Paul the Apostle towards their community and find its own meaning in his sayings concerning traditional family and social structures. The southern white churches read the Book of Revelation and find self-definition as the elect of this dispensation awaiting the Rapture of the church, even as Latin Americans read the Gospels and see Jesus as the great Liberator of the poor, bringing salvation in this life. This is not merely ethnically based; it proves valid for any community, especially an oppressed minority. Women read the Bible not as individuals, but as part of the larger female community. The poor do so as the poor, the outcast as the outcast. The Bible provides a source of meaning in communities as conservative as fundamentalist factions and equally in progressive welcoming-and-affirming churches.

This opens the way to the clearest path towards peaceful unity. Unity comes by the common virtue of tolerance, creating a collage of meaningful communities. It paints a mosaic of mini-narratives. One community has no authority to judge and condemn

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<sup>180</sup> Again, one wonders who stands apart from reality to determine what is 'safe' or what is unacceptable. What objective person/being can determine what is allowed and what is not? As obvious as this inconsistency is, it is continually left unanswered.

others, super-imposing its image upon another. What of a community that does not agree with this definition of tolerance, which holds that its definition of reality encompasses all and that its interpretation of the text claims a meta-narrative? This commits the unpardonable sin. Intolerance breaks the exclusive prohibition. This is the only objective truth post-modernity permits. It steps out of bounds. The world is diverse, too diverse for anyone to reign as objectively 'right'. There is simply no way one community can be right and the rest of us wrong. Our eyes have been opened to our next-door neighbors...from around the world.

### ***We've Got the Whole World in Our Hands***

Think of this. A man sits out on his back porch in northern New England. He takes a moment to take in the cool fresh air, sips his French Vanilla coffee, and beholds the natural beauty of the outdoors. He then flips open his wireless laptop. From his keyboard he writes an email to three business colleagues. With one click it is sent off. One beeps on a blackberry in Orange County California to a lady walking the beach. Another pops up in Tokyo by a colleague sitting in a high-rise office. A third is sent to a car in Berlin stuck in traffic. The beach walker text-messages everyone back. They all receive it, instantly. No, this is not science fiction. In fact, it is old news.

While for the first time we have found mini-communities as the final bearers of meaning, ironically we can now genuinely speak of the global community. Not only has world travel become easily attainable (again, old news), but the global transfer of information is virtually instantaneous. Social networking sites have made on-going relationships with 'friends' around the world possible without once meeting in person, picking up a phone, or writing a letter.<sup>181</sup> This is not "business as usual" for human

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<sup>181</sup> It is significant that social networking sites such as *Facebook* or *Myspace* use the term 'Friends' to describe connections within an individual's social network. To be considered a Friend in the cyber-



beings; this is a “first time ever” for humanity. Perhaps the culture of post-modernity would like to challenge Qoheleth’s *Ecclesiastes* that we find nothing new under the sun: this must have been written before high-speed FiOS.

One used to speak of 30-second sound bites, but the mentality has changed: Who has 30 seconds anymore? The Internet has made access to information on virtually anything as fast as you can type it. One can find a website for almost any business, community, or church on the map and even more websites for businesses, communities, and churches not on the map, on-line only. With video servers such as *YouTube* and satellite mapping such as *Google Earth*, one can access not only information but actual footage and photos of virtually any inhabitable place on the planet, and even some not so inhabitable. I can remember clicking onto footage of a dormitory in Antarctica. A young female resident opened the door to the outside during condition 1 weather and I could almost feel the cold through the screen.

Knowledge is power, but it also provides good entertainment. With this type of power at our eyesight, we have seen and read more while sitting in our bedrooms than most generations have fathomed to imagine in a lifetime. This is of course only when we find time away from the toys of our living rooms, 52” flat screen HDTVs with hundreds of satellite channels, the *Nintendo Wii* gaming system where we can play baseball or destroy dungeon monsters, and if we are bored with these, shall we turn on the satellite radio or just listen to one of the thousands of songs downloaded onto our *iPods*? As Neil Postman said over two decades ago, “we are a people on the verge of amusing ourselves to death.”<sup>182</sup>

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community is to be accepted by a click of the mouse on the other end. In this way, networkers can amass hundreds or thousands of Friends, whom they have never met, seen, spoken to, or live anywhere in the vicinity. This is a radical redefinition of friendship. The identity of this Friend is often solely an on-line relationship that may very well be a complete work of fiction: a male posing as a female, an adult posing as a child, an unemployed person posing as the president of his own fabricated company.

<sup>182</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (New York, NY: Penguin Group, 1986), 4.

The media revolution has effected how we view matters of spirituality as well. Sermons, lectures, or musings and meditations are available in MP3 from any gifted preacher, philosopher, or guru you want. Postman feared television would destroy the sacredness of religion, "On television, religion, like everything else, is presented, quite simply and without apology, as an entertainment. Everything that makes religion an historic, profound and sacred human activity is stripped away; there is no ritual, no dogma, no tradition, no theology, and above all, no sense of spiritual transcendence."<sup>183</sup> Yet TV preachers are almost a thing of the past. Who can sit still for an hour of power and watch someone preach, even with commercial breaks? Now we simply listen as we jog, eat, or use the bathroom. Churches have picked up on this and now employ as much media or more during a worship service as can be found in a typical home during the week. For better or worse, the media revolution has arrived. At such a time as this, with the world 24" from our eyes and the power to control it at our fingertips, people are left to ponder, "God? Who needs God? We ourselves would be considered gods to previous generations."

### ***Monorail! Monorail! Monorail! Monorail!***

Let us never be deceived into believing that post-modernism is just a comical idea. In reality, it presents us with an extremely serious and sobering cultural shift. It represents one of the most radical departures from the inherited culture that history has ever witnessed. It is as if culture just jumped trains and hopped on to the high-speed monorail. The problem is no one knows where the train is headed. Some cultural prophets see it as heading full speed into the predictable doom setup by modernity. Others see it as heading into a brave new world of reality. Some dismiss it as a passing

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<sup>183</sup> Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, 116-117.



fad while others laud it as a great awakening. We may mock many of its peculiarities, but let us not be so irreverent as to ridicule it as insignificant.

I am no prophet of culture. The destination seems to me not only unknown, but unknowable. Whether or not this is the harbinger of the end of western civilization as we know it or just a cultural trend that will find itself consigned to the way of bell-bottoms and A-Traks in a single generation poses a question answerable only in the mind of God. The question that consumes the preacher is how to deal with the new challenges and opportunities it presents. As the train begins to speed away, it has some preachers ignorantly boarding it like a Disney ride, while others sheepishly stand at the station preaching to the depleted crowd. Preachers either cough in the trail of dust behind it or ride in it, sitting down, enjoying a cocktail. Either way, they will eventually reduce themselves to insignificance. What is needed is the fortitude and stamina to keep up with the train without actually fully boarding it. Only then might we be able to speak meaningfully and authoritatively to the passengers zooming in it.

To change the metaphor, if we are to be fishers of men, it is no little thing to understand that the waters have drastically changed. A storm brews. The calm surface has been stirred. The seas have changed temperatures. The fish have swum deeper. The preacher must understand the times. Jesus warned, "When evening comes, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times" (Matt 16:3). The Kingdom of God loomed upon the 1<sup>st</sup> century Jews and they missed it. Perhaps this generation of preachers will wisely read the times, not only of the turns of redemptive history, but of the tides of culture, and find themselves with a stunning Kingdom opportunity. As D. A. Carson puts it, "It follows that that stance is most likely to be deeply Christian which not only recognizes the comprehensive turning points in redemptive history but reads its

own times well and ponders deeply how best to respond and take initiative within that (broader) cultural setting."<sup>184</sup>

### ***Is Preaching Out-Dated?***

With this cultural atmosphere, is it still reasonable to think that preaching has a place? Does the traditional picture of a lone figure presenting a monologue explaining and applying an ancient text to a listening audience week-in-and-week-out seem untenable? John Stott describes the criticisms against preaching almost three decades ago: "It is a dying art, they say, an outmoded form of communication, 'an echo from an abandoned past'."<sup>185</sup> He wrote this in 1982. For a dying art it has had a lengthy wake.

It is the contention of this book that preaching is not only still viable, it is as important now as ever. The preacher stands as a herald of God, speaking an unchanging gospel in behalf of his Master to a changing world. The role of a preacher has not changed, anymore than the message of the preacher has changed. Yes, preachers need to contextualize. Yet, in order to contextualize a message, there must first be a real message to contextualize. Yes, part of the preacher's job is to adapt his methods to a new day. Yet, in order for him to adapt his methods he must first know what the job is. This book is about this message, and that job.

We may wade in deep waters, but the solid rock of the gospel on which preaching stands runs deeper still. The culture changes like a strong wind, but the nature of preaching rests on firm ground. On this ground, this solid rock, the preacher must build his homiletic house. The foundation of preaching is durable regardless of the culture, which changes like shifting shadows. On this firm foundation then, we must remain.

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<sup>184</sup> D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited*, 85.

<sup>185</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1923), 50.



## CHAPTER 9

### THE ROLE OF THE HERALD

#### *The Pulpit of Grace and the Cure of Souls*

"And so all who are not disciples of Christ are lost!" The teacher was amazed.

"Yes, all, whether Burmans or foreigners."

"This is hard," answered the teacher, after digesting the idea a little while.

"Yes, it is hard, indeed; otherwise I should not have come all this way, and left parents and all, to tell you of Christ."

—Conversation between Burmese tutor U Aung Min and Adoniram Judson, missionary to Burma.

#### *Preaching as a Stubborn Invariable*

One of the most striking realities about preaching is its constancy, its transcendence. As the prophet Isaiah proclaimed, "The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever" (Isa 40:8). Times change, cultures change, people change, but the message of the preacher does not. The message does not mutate based on the world that surrounds it. The message of the herald must never lock arms with a cultural fad. It must never unite itself with a trendy fashion. It must remain mere Christianity. As the devious demon Screwtape would counsel his junior tempter Wormwood, "What we want, if men become Christians at all, is to keep them in the state of mind I call 'Christianity And'... Substitute for the faith itself some Fashion with a Christian colouring. Work on their horror of the Same Old Thing."<sup>186</sup> And yet, despite the intentions of a Screwtape, still preachers in every generation preach the Same Old Thing, mere Christianity. The preacher faithfully heralds the message for one more generation before he turns it over to the next and goes to meet his Maker. He brings the old message with prophetic authority into a new context.

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<sup>186</sup> C. S. Lewis, "The Screwtape Letters" *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2002), letter 25.

Think for a moment if this were not the case. Imagine if the role of the preacher were to change the message to fit the culture, if it was to transform the content of the gospel in order to become vogue to the next generation. What would become of it? Each generation takes the message of Christ and changes it ever so slightly. Within the first few generations, only a few miles and a couple of decades away from the historical Christ, the message would be slightly altered from the original. And, as times change and cultures shift from 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine to 21<sup>st</sup> century America, the message would continue to shift, with each generation adapting it ever so slightly. Like the words of gossips which are slightly embellished as they pass from one set of ears to the next, in the end the statement becomes so different than the original it is hardly recognizable. In time Christianity would be a religion entirely of our own making. It would cease to resemble the Christ we claim to follow, but would appear a monstrous distortion of him pieced together by the images of a thousand generations. It would consist of a message built not on "the foundation of the prophets and the apostles, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone" (Eph 2:20), but on the compromise of the ages. It would resemble the mangled traditions of a folk religion, but infinitely more horrendous, a catechism of capitulation.

Contrast this to a herald's calling. God calls him first and foremost to faithfulness, the virtue held highest and dearest to his heart. As we have established, art and application apply as he communicates the message to new times, but the message itself remains constant. Each herald is evaluated on his ability to communicate the Master's message faithfully to his generation: the pre-modern people hear Christ's own message; the modern man that same gospel; the postmodern communities, the Same Old Thing. As times pass, as new generations arise, the undying goal and the unflagging effort of the herald remains to keep the message as the very oracles of God. The herald's message must be faithful, even if it means going to the lions. He does his



duty, and after he finishes he goes on to meet his Master, hopeful of hearing those hallowed words, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt 25:21; 23).

### ***Puppets, Pugilists, and the Pulpit of Grace***

Not all who preach agree on the message's constancy. Preachers in each generation seem more than happy to let the message mutate into the mold of each new generation.<sup>187</sup> The message oozes as the culture emerges. Christianity may maintain its outer shell, allowing only the terminology to withstand the cultural tide. "The Word of God," "the Sacrifice of Christ," "the church," and even the title "God" are redefined to fit the needs and appetites of a new generation. Inside the shell is supposedly a fresh liberating message, a new kernel, one that animates the outer layer. The *Christ of faith* lives on in the paper mache of the *Jesus of history*. We are left with the preacher as a puppet of culture, a farcical shell of true Christianity, ever obedient to the changing demands of the present age.

Sadly, the result of a message that simply mimics the culture is that it has nothing to say to it. A message that encourages each individual to pursue her own truth, spoken into a culture that already believes truth to be subjective, has lost its voice. A sermon that calls people to prioritize acceptance and toleration of other religions and worldviews as valid alternatives to Christianity, spoken into a pluralistic culture, becomes a mute message. It floats downstream with the current along with others already swimming with the flow. In the end it is the culture that does the teaching, and the message of Christ that is learning! This, as J. Gresham Machen told us in a previous

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<sup>187</sup> For one example of this, see Brian MacLaren, *The Church on the Other Side: Doing Ministry in the Postmodern Matrix* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000).

generation about the tenets of theological liberalism, is no Christianity at all.<sup>188</sup> It may masquerade by the same name, but has little to do with mere Christianity.

This does not mean that the preacher fights against culture. Some in despising the paradigm of the puppet have opted for the role of the pugilist: the preacher, like a boxer, steps into the ring. He spouts off his tirades against a rebellious world. Christ stands vehemently against culture. He feels called to battle for a Christian culture, politically and socially, to overtake the secular-humanist culture. A culture war rages all around us, and our job as culture warriors is to fight for King Jesus. Someone is going to win the war, and in the end we better make sure Christians stand over the bloodied body of post-modernity. Through whatever means necessary, Christians should triumph victorious over the culture.<sup>189</sup>

The problem with this is it fights the wrong enemy. Individuals make up culture, and individuals far from being our enemy are the objects of Christ's message of mercy. As David Gordon writes, "The culture warrior refuses to acknowledge that true and significant cultural change can happen only when the individual members of the culture have forsaken their own self-centeredness, and have revolted against their revolt against God."<sup>190</sup> The message of the gospel goes forth not as a weapon to slay, but as a well of safety. The real enemy is sin. If pushed a step further, as condemned sinners, God's righteous wrath poses our greatest threat. Ironically Justice has become our foe, as it is because of justice that we face hell. Christ did not die merely to condemn the culture, He died to satisfy God's justice, "so as to be just and the one who justifies those who

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<sup>188</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity & Liberalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1923).

<sup>189</sup> It is baffling to think what would happen if Christians ever won the 'Culture War'. Would they pursue a theocracy? Philip Yancey tells about a conversation he had with a Muslim who said to him, "I find no guidance in the Qur'an on how Muslims should live as a minority in a society and no guidance in the New Testament on how Christians should live as a majority" (Yancey, 'The Lure of Theocracy,' *Christianity Today* 50/7 (July 2006): 64, quoted in D. A. Carson, *Christ & Culture Revisited*, 202. Like a dog chasing a fire engine, all the excitement seems to be on the chase rather than much thought given to what would happen if there is success. Some who have thought through it, usually labeled theonomists, take us to dangerous territory, it seems to me, that moves us unthinkable further from the New Testament church.

<sup>190</sup> T. David Gordon, *Why Johnny Can't Preach* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2009), 87.



have faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26). The preacher calls people, all people, to flee to the grace of God in Christ. Far from hating culture and waging war with the world, the preacher tries to redeem the people that make up a culture, by the power of the gospel.

Because we treasure the love of the Father, in one sense we must not love the world, "If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 John 2:15). The world persists in sin and rebellion against God, and those who love it do not love God. Yet, in another sense, we *must* love the world, because we know the Father Himself loves it, "for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16). We love it because it is replete with individuals weighted with immense God-granted worth and value, broken Image bearers who need God's grace. The preacher is not called to beat these people up, but to welcome them to grace. The puppet may cower as a useless wimp, but the pugilist intimidates as an unnecessary bully.

Between the puppet and the pugilist stands the pulpit of grace. It is a place of authority, where God's mighty Word still speaks. From it the preacher speaks with prophetic honesty to everyone without discrimination, about sin and judgment, as well as with the lavished love offered by the gospel to all who would come and believe. In it the preacher does not merely voice his own ideas about the changing winds and waves of culture, but speaks with confidence built on the solid rock of Truth. From it the Word of Christ stands out not as part of the white noise of the cacophony of the crowd, but as the powerful heralding forth of a message from God, a "Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! Thus saith the Lord."

### ***In a Country not our Own***

As much as we must recognize that the preacher stands with one foot within the culture, he also stands with one foot already out of it. He lives in this age, but also in the age to come. In a very real sense "our citizenship is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). Yes, as

John Stott and the popular blog claim, we live “Between Two Worlds.”<sup>191</sup> But one of these worlds is fleeting and the other infinite, “for here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb 13:14). Preachers, like all Christians, are “aliens and strangers in the world” (1 Pet 2:11). We have a stewardship here, but this is not our home. The world became foreign territory for God’s people ever since we have gone east of Eden. We work as ambassadors of Christ (1 Cor 5:20). How different should preachers lusting for heaven look in contrast with teachers in bed with the world? As John the apostle writes, “They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us” (1 John 4:5-6). We are born from above, and can already see with spiritual eyes a Kingdom not of this world.

The world, the fallen and depraved state of the *cosmos*, will always rage more or less in opposition to the herald’s Master, and because of this the world will never love the faithful preacher. Jesus explained to his disciples, “If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:19). Christ told Pilate before he went to the cross, “My kingdom is not of this world... But now my kingdom is from another place,” (John 18:36) and it is that kingdom of which we are subjects. The preacher should be wary of befriending the world, as James rebukes, “You adulterous people, don’t you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God” (Jas 4:4). The preacher who goes into the ministry looking to buddy up with the culture will find himself gradually slipping into compromise until after a span of time he looks back and sees he has switched sides and Christ now stands against him.

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<sup>191</sup> “Between Two Worlds” is the title of John Stott’s well-known work on preaching, as well as the title of the blog found at [www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/](http://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/) an outstanding resource managed by Justin Taylor, editor of Crossway Books.



Pessimism and cynicism are no solution. If Christians are providentially offered power, they should use it for good. Social, artistic, and political influence should be embraced among Christian leaders to whom it is granted. Government is not a necessary evil, but a necessary good that often does evil (Rom 13:1-7). We must speak truth to power. Pharaoh had his Joseph, Nebuchadnezzar his Daniel, Xerxes his Esther, and Herod his John the Baptist. Paul preached the gospel to the Roman officials until it made them uncomfortable (Acts 24:26; 26:28-32). Christians should pray for those in authority, that they as sinners needing grace would be saved, as well as that there would be freedom and equity that "we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Tim 2:1-7). We should recognize the dangers and limitations of worldly power. It should be used for God's glory and the betterment of humanity, but never as a substitute for gospel proclamation. Cultural improvement is not the same as spiritual regeneration.

Christians should have high hopes about affecting the culture around us, as Scripture promises that it can and should be done. And yet, this *fallen* world will never be home. Reversing the Fall and restoring the Universe are ultimately outside the preacher's job description. Our hope is that Christ will one day return to the world, to judge and transform it, not that the world will one day return to Christ. The conversion of the *cosmos* is not the work of a herald, but of a crowned rider on a white horse called Faithful and True, whose eyes are like a flame of fire (Rev 19:11-21). Until that climactic day, the preacher fights for the redemption of souls.

### ***Preaching as the Cure of Souls***

What does this mean for the preacher? First, it means there exists no such thing as a Christian culture (how does a culture become regenerate, justified, and saved?). As mentioned, what a preacher does from the pulpit will have influence on the culture.

Christians, like salt and light, are called to enmesh themselves in the nations around them. Being salt and light does not Christianize the culture, but it should influence its moral character. Ideally, it makes a culture more just, more equitable, and more compassionate to the oppressed. And yet, this enmeshing becomes a (very important) bi-product of the preacher's primary work. People can be relatively moral even without having received the gospel, but even this is ultimately futile. The message of the herald is not "Be just, equitable, and compassionate." If so, we regress back to the burden of legalism. The herald proclaims, "We are not just, equitable, and compassionate, and therefore under God's wrath. Yet God calls us to repentance and grace is offered in Christ."

The gospel stands as the only hope of the culture. After all, cultures are made up of people, individual *souls* (from the Greek word *psyche*), human beings. The only way to change a culture is to change the units that make a culture. The integrity of the culture only reveals the state of the people who make it up. One may talk about the 'soul of a culture,' but when doing so she knows she is personifying, giving the culture human traits. The beliefs, arts, literature of a culture, derive from individuals. A culture does not write a book, an individual writes a book and individuals read it. A culture does not perform a song, individuals sing, play, and hear music, and it effects how they think and view the world. Individuals may share similar core beliefs and epistemological convictions, creating what we call a worldview, but they never cease to be individuals.

The herald directs his message toward individuals. Christ calls us to love our neighbor specifically, not 'the neighborhood' generally. The preacher seeks the cure of souls.<sup>192</sup> If that affects the culture as a whole, thank God, but that is not its ultimate goal.

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<sup>192</sup> There is a movement to see salvation as corporate that wishes to intentionally downplay the individual. For example, N. T. Wright writes, "...to see evangelism in terms of the announcement of God's kingdom, of Jesus's lordship and of the consequent new creation, avoids from the start any suggestion that the main or central thing that has happened is that the new Christian has entered into a private relationship with God or with Jesus and that this relationship is the main or only thing that matters." *Surprised by Hope* (New York,



If anything, the reverse should be true: we seek a more equitable and free society so that it will be easier for the gospel to spread to individuals. The heart of Christianity must never be confused as a means to a social end. If the individual souls of the culture have not been reconciled to God, we have only made a superficial and temporal impact. As C. S. Lewis wrote: "We must not suppose that if we succeeded in making everyone nice we should have saved their souls. A world of nice people, content in their own niceness, looking no further, turned away from God, would be just as desperately in need of salvation as a miserable world—and might even be more difficult to save."<sup>193</sup> Niceness may be an effect of the gospel, but it is not its end.

The cure of souls is not a means to a social Utopia, not on this side of eternity. But thank God for this beautiful bi-product of the gospel. If a culture is filled with people who are white hot with love for God and for people, then the cultural climate will rise. If it is full of cold hearts and lifeless souls, it will be as bitter cold as an Arctic breeze.

The preacher does not preach to culture as some amorphous blob, he speaks to individuals who together make up culture. To love culture is to love a nonentity. The young preacher who leaves seminary with the idea in his head, "I am going to transform the culture" is probably in for a rude awakening. Not because cultural transformation is not possible, it most certainly is, but because his idea of transforming culture is likely distinct from redeeming individuals. It is easy to love culture, as it has no face, no heart, and no emotions. Cultures do not have strokes, get divorced, or die of cancer. It is people that we are to love, and it is people we strive to save, and it is people to whom we preach. Preachers seek the cure of souls. Culture is a label; a person is an individual who needs to be brought back to God.

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NY: HarperCollins, 2008), 229. Without wishing to deny the importance of community, what would God's kingdom mean if it does not affect us individually?

<sup>193</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Mere Christianity" *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2002), see chapter "Nice People or New Men."

The preacher should care deeply for the peace of the city, but how superficial is that care if it does not first and foremost deal with the eternal nature of the individuals for which he cares? Must even preachers be reminded again of Jesus' words, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" (Mark 8:36-38). To try to redeem culture is to try to redeem the intangible and transient, but to redeem people is to redeem the eternal and infinite. C. S. Lewis, in his sermon the *Weight of Glory* reminded us: "There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilization—these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub, and exploit—immortal horrors or everlasting splendours."<sup>194</sup> The preacher must remember the culture around him is fleeting. It is temporary, like the withering grass and the fading flower. It is here today and gone tomorrow, as is the preacher's own life. As Thomas a Kempis succinctly placed it, "Today man is; tomorrow he is gone."<sup>195</sup> Let us not forget to answer the question, "What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (Jas 4:14). The day will surely come when we and the people we preach to, along with our whole culture, will become less than a fading memory in the minds of future generations. Perhaps we feel as if we have found some new things under the sun, but *Qoheleth* will have the last word after all, "There is no remembrance of men of old, and even those who are yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow" (Eccl 1:11). If our message gives hope for this world alone, we are to be pitied more than all men. The message of the preacher speaks to people about eternity. People with real ears, real hearts, and real immortal souls. Beside this, all else is only "vanity."

<sup>194</sup> C. S. Lewis, "The Weight of Glory" *The Weight of Glory* (New York, NY: HarperOne, 2001).

<sup>195</sup> Thomas a Kempis, *Imitation of Christ*, Book 1 XXIII:1.



## ***The Herald of God***

No doubt things have changed in the West. Christianity progresses on its way South and East. The hour is late. American Evangelicalism approaches dusk.<sup>196</sup> The dawn of a secularized society appears on the horizon. Yet, there is hope.

Revivals begin with faithful preaching. "I confess to being..." revealed John Stott, "an impenitent believer in the indispensable necessity of preaching both for evangelism and for the healthy growth of the Church."<sup>197</sup> The answer is found in *The Same Old Thing*. *Perhaps* the pulpit of grace stands in direct contrast with this generation more than with any previous one.<sup>198</sup> *Perhaps* the culture has drastically changed in a way that has made preaching far more difficult for the herald. *Perhaps* the preacher must proclaim objective truth in a world that holds all truth as subjective and perspectival. *Perhaps* the preacher must proclaim the exclusivity of the gospel, in a world that prescribes pluralism and adores inclusivism. *Perhaps* the preacher must proclaim the all-encompassing story of the Bible, the only real Story of humanity, into a world that despises meta-narratives and hates monolithic worldviews. *Perhaps* the preacher must claim meaning, based not merely on existential perceptions of deconstructed texts, but on the Authorial intent of Holy Writ. *Perhaps* the preacher must preach meaning into a culture that has come to believe, as Nietzsche, we "wander through an endless Nothingness" not as God's Image bearers but as Bertrand Russell, a "chance collocation of atoms." *Perhaps* this is true. As one cultural commentator laments:

In previous eras, when a person came before God there was a clear sense of disproportion. God was huge, vast, filling the universe with his majesty and might. He spoke, and worlds came into existence. He judged, and nations ground to a halt. He moved, and the entire course of human history moved with

<sup>196</sup> For some even-headed predictions see for example Michael Spencer, "The Coming Evangelical Collapse" *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 10, 2009.

<sup>197</sup> John Stott, *Between Two Worlds* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 9.

<sup>198</sup> This is an uneasy 'perhaps'. We must be careful to neither make a shrine out of modernism nor to demonize postmodernism. There have been many cultures throughout church history that have been deeply antithetical to the gospel. Those favorable to post-modernism have made a bogeyman out of modernism. Let us not be so foolish as to turn the tables and make postmodernism the bogeyman.

him. A human, by contrast, was minuscule, finite, dependent, fragile. Aware of the purity of God's heart and the darkness of his own, he approached God with a heart both timid and penitent. Conscious of the paltry proportions of his own resources and the limitless scale of God's, he approached God with deep trust and dependence. And mindful of the enormity of Christ's cross—as well as of his own unworthiness—the human approached God with a gratitude that extended beyond words... That was yesterday. Today, when the world bumps into God, it yawns and wanders past.<sup>199</sup>

Even if it is, then so be it. This may be the greatest strength of Christianity, to be able to run so starkly upstream, to be so dastardly different. As Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Only when it is dark enough can you see the stars." *Certainty* in a world full of *uncertainty* resounds louder, and in the end, more obviously Christian. As a fellow Gen X-er writes, "Young people will give their lives for an exclamation point, but they will not give their lives for a question mark, not for very long anyway."<sup>200</sup> The more wild the preacher's message becomes to a culture, the more stubbornly it stands out and brightly it shines.

The gospel never bows to the culture, but neither does it ever bow out on it. As Wells reminds us, all Christians "are to be a reminder in this fallen world that there is another world that will be there long after all the ravages of time have done their work and all that we now see in our world has passed away."<sup>201</sup> Christ is still present, and access to Him still available through the cross. As Charles McIlvaine (1799-1873) addressed those entering the ministry of preaching:

Oh, let us take care that our ministry shall keep full in the sight of men that open way, that free access, that directness of coming, not to some mere symbolical representation, but to the *very present* Christ, in all his tenderness of love and power to save... The light of the sun is not more free to every man that cometh into the world than is the salvation of Jesus to every believing sinner. It is our business to be continually showing that precious truth; coming by faith, the sole condition – Christ, the full and perfect salvation of all that come.<sup>202</sup>

<sup>199</sup> David W. Henderson, *Culture Shift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 221.

<sup>200</sup> Kevin DeYoung & Ted Kluck, *Why We are Not Emergent (By Two Guys Who Should Be)* (Chicago, IL: Moody 2008), 127.

<sup>201</sup> David Wells, *The Courage to Be Protestant* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 174.

<sup>202</sup> Charles P. McIlvaine, *Preaching Christ: The Heart of Gospel Ministry* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2003), 41-42.



Regardless of the collective thinking and moral status of a people, the state of individuals remains the same: "In Adam's fall, we sinned all... thy life to mend, this Book attend."<sup>203</sup> The Book of God contains the herald's message. The preacher still proclaims the gospel, Christ's saving death in behalf of sinners, and the immeasurable mercy towards the individuals who trust in him, whether modern, post-modern, or whatever the next wave will inevitably be. Human beings are still sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, creatures who need to be justified in the sight of their Creator before they meet Him face to face; men and women given the hope of the resurrection. No culture of man wanders far enough that the gospel cannot find him, and no spiritual darkness blinds in such a way that the gospel cannot open his eyes.

The pulpit of grace must be an ever-present constant that does not change like shifting shadows. William Cowper, the Christian poet and hymn writer, penned for a previous generation:

The pulpit, therefore, (and I name it filled  
with solemn awe, that bids me well beware  
with what intent I touch that holy thing;)   
the pulpit (when the satirist has at last,  
strutting and vamping in an empty school,  
spent all his force, and made no proselyte;)   
I say the pulpit (in the sober use  
of its legitimate, peculiar powers)  
must stand acknowledged, while the world shall stand,  
the most important and effectual guard,  
support, and ornament of virtue's cause.  
There stands the messenger of truth. There stands  
the legate of the skies; his theme divine,  
his office sacred, his credentials clear.  
By him, the violated law speaks out  
its thunders, and by him, in strains as sweet  
as angels use, the gospel whispers peace.  
He 'stablishes the strong, restores the weak,  
reclaims the wanderer, binds the broken heart,  
and, armed himself in panoply complete  
of heavenly temper, furnishes with arms  
bright as his own, and trains, by every rule

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<sup>203</sup> The New England Primer, 1784 ed.

of holy discipline, to glorious war,  
the sacramental host of God's elect.  
Are all such teachers? Would to Heaven all were!  
But, hark! The doctor's voice! Fast wedged between  
Two empires he stands, and with swollen cheeks  
Inspires the News, his trumpet.<sup>204</sup>

The preacher's real concern should be that when the speeding train of post-modernity either crashes or gives way to the next ride, there we shall find faithful preachers, standing tall in the pulpit of grace, heralding the same message, the same gospel, the same Christ. We will make sure that God has the final word. "The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever" (1 John 2:17).

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<sup>204</sup> William Cowper (1731-1800), *Literature of the English language: comprising representative selections From The Best Authors, Also Lists Of Contemporaneous Writers And Their Principal Works*, Ephraim Hunt, ed. (New York, NY: Ivison, Blakeman, Taylor & Co., 1872), 405.



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## **VITA**

Richard J. Harrington was born in Melrose, MA on August 15, 1978. He received a B. A. in Biblical and Theological Studies from Gordon College in Wenham, MA. and a M. Div from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, IL. He is currently in his 3<sup>rd</sup> year of the Doctor of Ministry program in Preaching from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, MA, expected graduation January 2011. He serves as Teaching Pastor of First Baptist Church of Haverhill, MA. He resides near the beach in Salisbury, MA. with his wife Jessica and their son Isaac and daughter Sophie.